





## **Stranger Things Have Happened by Edith Sidebottom**

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**Summary:** Ana Thompson always seems to wind up in the strangest predicaments... A perpetual victim of Murphy's Law, Ana finds herself arriving in Hawkins, Indiana just prior to the events of November 6th, 1983. And, just prior to falling for a certain police chief with a boatload of baggage and a penchant for throwing punches. Jim Hopper/OC



# 1. Chapter 1

Ana was a runner.

Not a literal runner, of course, though should the occasion call for it, she could be coerced into accomplishing an impressive eleven-minute mile.

No, Ana was a metaphorical runner. Anytime a problem arose in her life, which could not be solved by mere avoidance, she ran.

Ana envisioned herself to be a nomad in this way; free from all ties that would bind her to any one place for too long, should the moment call for a rapid relocation.

This affinity for running is what landed Ana Thompson in Hawkins, Indiana at the start of the summer of 1983.

*Kacey Musgraves as Ana Thompson*

**Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things. Only Ana Thompson and her ideas belong to me.**



## 2. Chapter 2

Hawkins, Indiana, with its population of around 30,000 citizens, wasn't a place people just ended up at. Either you were born there and never left or...well, that was pretty much it. Hawkins was the type of small town where everyone was privy to everyone else's business; except most of the time, people were just too polite to comment on it.

For these reasons, the attractive, new Reading teacher, to be employed at Hawkins Middle School, was quite the talk about the town. Not that any of this interest was made apparent to her face; instead, people peered through their blinds when she drove past in her Chevy pickup truck, that was new enough to stand out in town but not so new as to imply she came from money. Eyes followed her every move as she perused through the supermarket; all were wondering what would bring a young woman to a town like this: alone, apparently with no family nearby, and with no husband nor children to boot.

None dared speak to the thirty-something brunette though; who was likened to a new toy in a town deprived of entertainment, but she was frequently spoken of behind closed doors.

At the start of June 1983, Ana Thompson had blown into town in a wave of moving trucks and mystery, taking up residence in the old Mooney house just on the outskirts of town. And, that's all anyone knew of her: where she had chosen to take inhabit and who would be her employer upon the completion of summer.

Perhaps that isn't the fairest of assessments; there was one other thing that the townspeople of Hawkins did recognize quickly about the new soon to be school teacher: that she was partial to beer.

This mutual affinity for a good ale would be the foundation of the growing, would be tumultuous, relationship between Ana Thompson and Police Chief Jim Hopper.



### 3. Chapter 3

Every Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday evening played out the same way for Ana Thompson; the Hawkins locals quickly began to realize.

At 6:00 PM, like clockwork, she would roll up to Benny's Burgers and occupy a table alone, with nothing more than a used paperback book to keep her company. Each visit she'd order a different item from the menu, but always with the same caveat: no tomatoes.

Some people find eating alone to be an awkward and, well, often sad event; however, this was not the case for Ana. As far as she saw it, once you had reached a certain age and were still single, you learned how to get on with the necessities of life without waiting on others to coordinate their schedule with yours.

It was on one of these standard Thursday evenings after she had been in town for around two weeks when Benny Hammond became the first person to attempt to befriend Ana beyond casual niceties.

"I gotta wonder how you can read a book like that and not go to bed scared as hell," Benny commented casually one night while refilling her water glass. A small smirk graced her features as she earmarked the page she was on and carefully closed her copy of *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote. "It takes a bit more than words to scare me these days, Mr. Hammond," was the reply she gave when her eyes inclined towards him.

Benny Hammond reminded most people of a bear: huge, potentially lethal, but at the end of the day, he still looked so damn huggable. Given enough time, Ana would have developed more than a substantial crush on the owner of Benny's Burgers, and she knew it too. God, was she a sucker for tall men, and if they had a beard to go along with it, even better!

"Mr. Hammond is my father, people around here call me Benny," he stated while holding his hand out to the woman. Taking the offered appendage and giving it a firm shake, she responded with, "Ana Thompson."



"So I've heard" came Benny's retort as he pulled out the chair across from her and made himself comfortable at the table. "Ah," she said with crossed arms, leaning back into the foldable chair, "so there has been talk of me?" The smirk that hadn't left her face since Benny struck up a conversation growing slightly more pronounced.

"It's a small town," paired with a shrug was all the response she was getting to that particular inquiry. Instead, Benny followed up with his query, "so, where are you from, Ms. Thompson?"

"If it's Benny to me, then it's Ana to you," she taunted and received a chuckle in response. "Houston, Texas" was ultimately the answer to the question that had been lingering in the air of Hawkins over the last couple of weeks.

"Texas is an awfully long way from Indiana," Benny observed while eying the newcomer skeptically. "What could possibly bring a girl like you to a town like this?" came Benny's follow up.

Ana sighed and her eyes downturned to the table in front of her for a few moments before looking back to Benny, "that's an awfully long story, and I believe you have customers to attend to." At this observation, they both looked around the burger joint that, aside from Earl and Henry, was relatively empty and then back at each other before sharing a smile.

"I think I can find the time," Benny grinned.



## 4. Chapter 4

Every Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday evening for Ana Thompson didn't end at Benny's Burgers though. After ensuring she had enough food in her belly, Ana would walk herself over to the local bar down the block.

Perhaps the more accurate term for this type of establishment would be a hole in the wall. It was the type of rundown pub that only locals would frequent, any out of towners would be too put off upon viewing its disheveled exterior ever to venture inward.

Here, sitting alone at the bar, Ana did her best people watching. She didn't crowd gaze to pass judgment, no, who was she to critique anyone's life choices while she sat isolated. But, she long ago realized that no one whose life was easy drank regularly, and everyone who drank regularly had their fair share of stories to divulge.

And, so, she sat and watched the underside of Hawkins, Indiana unfold before her in a haze of smoke, alcohol and overheard conversations.

It was at the same bar that Earl and Henry, who had seen her become fast friends with Benny, had, after a few drinks, offered to take her out on their fishing boat. While Ana was a fair weather fan of fishing, she figured it best to steer clear of those particular old geezers and invented an excuse of being 'too busy' to deter their advances. It's not that they were terrible guys per se, they were two older men who had been married for far too long to women they had grown to despise, and it was just easier to avoid that situation at all costs.

No, the irregular patron that caught Ana's attention most was the one, and only, police Chief Jim Hopper.

While Ana visited this particular watering hole with strategic consistency, always partaking in two beers, never more never less; Hopper seemed to visit only when the fancy hit him; drinking hard liquor to the point where any sensible person would show concern, then leaving with whichever local lady seemed the most willing.



This appeared to be a pattern, of which Hawkins residents had grown accustomed to and didn't bat a single eyelash at. Ana found it strange that an entire county would be so comfortable with a police chief who so blatantly flaunted both his alcoholism and promiscuity but, again, chopped it up to Hawkins being a small town with minimal issues that would require the utmost of law enforcement's attention.

She once inquired about the chief's extracurricular activities to Benny and was brushed off with a simple: "Hopper's been through a lot," which was enough to deter her from probing any further.

However, after a few weeks of seeing this paradigm unfold, and with a loose enough tongue, Ana finally reached the point where she couldn't avoid the subject any further.

On a Tuesday in mid-June, Hopper made the crucial mistake of taking a seat at the bar top near enough to where Ana had chosen to settle for the evening. Through her peripheral vision, she thoroughly appraised the man who seemed to be exceptionally popular among the singles crowd of Hawkins.

James "Jim" Hopper was first and foremost tall, always a plus! He had a beard that was manicured enough to imply he knew the importance of being presentable, but scraggly enough to show that, that was the extent of any shits given. He was broad and walked with undeniable confidence. But, his shoulders drooped just enough to imply that there was a weight upon his shoulders, which no amount of alcohol nor women could permanently lift.

He sat there with a tumbler of whiskey in his hand, swirling the ice and liquor around in mindless contemplation, a cigarette hanging loosely from his lips when Ana interrupted his mindless stupor with...

"You're a bit of a slut, aren't you?"



## 5. Chapter 5

"You're a bit of a slut, aren't you?"

The question washed over Hopper in a confused daze. Clearly, it wasn't directed at him, right? Taking a chance glance around the vicinity, he quickly realized there was no other clientele within earshot aside from him and the woman whom the question had originated from.

"Excuse me," he uttered once removing the still burning cigarette from between his lips.

"I'm fairly certain you heard me," Ana confidently replied with a tilt of the head, making eye contact with the man for the first time.

Hopper, rightly so, looked offended and yet the shit-eating grin illuminating Ana's face showed the question was intended to be a jest more than anything.

"You're the new Hawkins Middle teacher, aren't you," he questioned after taking another puff of his cigarette; avoiding the original question altogether.

"That's right, and the only single woman in this town, you haven't bedded" she shot back; the grin never fading from her full lips, "or so it seems."

"Is that an offer," Jim smirked in return, finally joining in on the intended banter.

"No," Ana shrugged, before taking another sip of her drink, "just an observation."

It wasn't her finding Hopper unattractive that made Ana rebuke his implied proposition. Jim was undeniably appealing to her; tall, brunette men with blatant trauma had always been her preferred type, and ultimately her downfall.

It wasn't the age difference that deterred her either. Hopper was at least ten years her senior by the looks of it; but, Ana had always lived



in a manner that was more mature than her earthly years could account for, and so that didn't give pause.

Hell, she couldn't even fault him for openly sleeping around. God knows she had done her fair share of bed-hopping after coming to the conclusion that long term relationships just weren't her thing.

Instead, it was Ana's unyielding desire to be contrary that put a damper on any progression of the relationship, acquaintanceship, really.

As a child, Ana's father would frequently tell her that she would cut off her nose just to spite her face. He wasn't wrong in this sense; Ana had built her whole adult life around doing the exact opposite of what was expected of her. Regardless of whether it was something she, herself, wanted as well.

"Alright then," was the staunch reply that came from Hopper before inserting the significantly shortened cigarette between his lips, grabbing his drink, and heading away from her in search of that night's conquest.

Ana was certain she had really put her foot in it this time; her sarcastic nature didn't always go over well upon first meeting, though it was rarely intended to cause conflict.

However, when her two glasses had been drained, and the time came for her departure from the dingy establishment, Ana chanced one last glance back at the chief. He now sat with his arm casually draped over the local librarian, Marissa was her name, right? When their eyes reached one another across the hazy bar, Ana provided a nod in recognition, while Hopper tilted his tumbler to her in response.

Ana went home alone that night wondering if pride wasn't the deadliest sin of all.



## 6. Chapter 6

The next time Ana made an appearance at Benny's Burgers, she hadn't had enough time to take a seat at her regular table before being accosted by the owner himself.

"Heard you had a run in with the chief," Benny said, slinging a wash rag over his left shoulder while approaching her.

"You make it sound like I was arrested," she replied, taking a seat and digging around in her oversized purse for the copy of *The Color Purple* she was intending on reading that night.

"Who'd you even hear that from," she questioned after locating the book and carefully setting it upon the surface in front of her.

Benny was now leaning with both hands resting at the head of the table, causing her to crane back in the chair and tilt her head upwards to get a good look at his face.

"Hopper," he nodded, "came in here just the other day ranting about a woman with long black hair being mouthy as hell. Just assumed he was talking about you."

"Guilty as charged," she chuckled. At this response, Benny crossed his arms and appraised her contemplatively, "did you really call him a whore?"

"Of course not," she scoffed, "whores get paid. I called him a slut." There it was, the Cheshire grin that indicated she knew exactly how to push others buttons without going too far.

"You're playing with fire, girl," Benny stated while heading back to the kitchen. "Number 5, no tomatoes," he questioned without turning back to her. "Yes, please," she shouted to his retreating figure.

Benny returned with her food, and the chief wasn't mentioned again that evening. Instead, the two shot the shit; talking about one thing or another.

Benny explained how he and his girlfriend had recently broken up



because she was interested in marriage and he wasn't. She had egged his house as recompense for her wasted time, which he deemed a real "bitch to wash off."

Ana told him of meeting the first of her future coworkers, Scott Clarke, who taught Earth and Biology at Hawkins Middle School. After running into one another at the hardware store, Mr. Clarke had been quick to insist Ana come to dinner with himself and his partner, Jen. Figuring it never hurt to show up to a new job already knowing someone, she had agreed to come to theirs the next evening.

Jen and Scott were exceptionally kind and welcoming people towards Ana. He was astoundingly nerdy, almost to the point of cliché, but his passion for science was palpable and obviously what made him such a successful teacher. And Jen was phenomenally out of his league, and yet, they worked well together, contradicting the popular theory that nice guys always finish last.

Once her meal was finished, Benny and Ana had parted ways with a quick hug and a short, "see you soon." She'd then headed down to get a drink, as was the custom on these evenings.

Sitting alone at the bar was the man of the hour, with a half drunk beer in his hand. She plopped down in the seat next to him and asked, "having a light evening," while indicating the absence of brown liquor in front of him.

Almost as though he were awaiting her arrival: "didn't want to be caught with my pants down in case an out of townner decided to accost me again," he retorted without even chancing a glance in her direction.

"I'm an in-townner now," she countered before ordering her own beer from the bartender.

"So I've heard," he said, finally turning in his stool to face her, "from Houston, right?" She let out an exaggerated sigh at this, "Benny is such a town gossip."

Hopper wasn't budging though, and stayed silent, awaiting a legitimate response.



"Yes, Chief," she answered, propping her right elbow upon on the bar to rest her chin in her hand, "I moved here from Houston."

"Why Hawkins," he questioned. Just like a cop, straight to the inquiry, she thought. "Needed a change of scenery," was the only answer she offered with a slight shrug, before taking a long swig from her beer.

"There are plenty of other towns with scenery," he continued probing; committed to getting a substantial answer out of the woman who continued to be an utter mystery to the town's occupants.

"Alright, inquisitor," she mocked, turning her whole body towards him as to indicate he had her undivided attention. The action caused their knees to press against one another, a move neither acknowledged nor made an adjustment to remedy.

"Last summer I took a road trip all over the country by myself," she started. "You know, just trying to get a feel for different cities, see if any struck me as a better place to be than the one I was currently in. When I got to Hawkins, it felt strangely...right. If that makes any sense? It just felt like this was where I was supposed to be."

Hopper watched her intently while she explained her reasoning for moving to a place he, at best, despised on most days. Once she was finished, he gave her a terse nod. "Alright then," Hopper said, as to imply her answer was sufficient. After he returned to facing forward in his stool and she followed suit; both strangely sensitive to the loss of contact their knees joining had previously provided.

After that, there was a lull in the conversation; both of them sipping their beers quietly in contemplation. Ana interrupted the silence with, "so, one of your officers asked me out the other night."

Hopper's head and eyes snapped to her upon hearing the statement said so blasély, "WHAT?"



## 7. Chapter 7

"Which one," Hopper questioned past the cigarette positioned between his lips. Ana took a swig of her second beer and hummed in contemplation before answering, "tall dude, glasses. God, I'm terrible with names."

"Callahan," he queried removing the cigarette from his lips, grabbing it between his right fore and middle finger, "first names Phil?"

"That's the one," she said with a snap and point of the finger but offering up nothing more as an explanation.

"Well, what did you say," he asked, making no attempt to hide how taken aback he was. "Depends," she hesitated, "what should I know about him?"

'He's an idiot,' is what immediately came to Hopper's mind, but he didn't dare say that out loud. Instead, he settled with: "he's...age appropriate."

Ana nearly spits back out the large quaff she had just taken, and quickly put a hand over her mouth in an attempt to keep it in. That hadn't been anywhere close to the kind of response she was expecting.

Hopper chuckled, his face now holding a self-satisfied smirk; glad to have finally one-upped her in this game of banter they seemed to be playing.

"Really reaching for some positivity with that one, aren't you? Jesus, age-appropriate," she said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand to remove any drink that had escaped in her shock.

"Probably a good thing I'm on sabbatical from men then, if that's the best you have to offer. Mind if I bum a smoke from you," she asked.

Ana wasn't a regular smoker and therefore never took the effort to buy a pack to carry with her. Sometimes though, usually after a drink or two, the desire for one struck her. She could always rely on the



kindness of strangers to satiate her in these times of need, and tonight, Hopper would have to be her supplier.

"Yeah," he replied simply while pulling one of the offending sticks out of his pack and handing it to her. Ana took it gratefully and leaned forward when Hopper struck out his lighter, offering it to her.

As she inhaled that first breath, he returned to their previous stream of conversation: "you becoming a nun or something?" She chortled at this, "call me Sister Thompson."

They shared a smile before Hopper's face became serious once again, "what happened?"

Her eyes cast downward, watching her thumb flick the cigarette between her fingers, knocking the ash off one end and into the waiting tray. "Some fucked up shit," was her murmured reply, seeming further away now than sitting right next to him.

Just as quickly as the melancholy tone came on, Ana was pushing it away with a shake of the head. "Enough about me though, I'm boring," she said, taking another puff from her borrowed cigarette. "What about you," she asked with a wave of the hand in his general direction.

"What about me," he mimicked her actions. "Being a big city cop, what's the craziest shit you've seen," she queried back. Hopper scoffed at her use of the term 'big city cop,' "since I've been back, the worst thing that happened was when an owl attacked Eleanor Gillespie's head because it thought that her hair was a nest."

The image was enough to coax a hearty laugh out of both parties, but Ana latched on to something else, "since you've been back? Where were you before?"

"In the city," he responded, no longer looking at her, "been back four years." And that was it, offering no further explanation for the departure nor return to his hometown; just like she didn't go into detail about the 'fucked up shit' that had driven her to the same town.

That's how a friendship between the Chief of Police and the middle



school teacher developed and progressed; they shared enough to become familiar, but both were always dancing around pieces of their past neither were quite ready to share with the world or each other yet.



## 8. Chapter 8

Eventually, summer began to dwindle until it was the evening before parent-teacher night, which would usher in the new school year.

Ana sat with her arms crossed on top of the bar with her chin resting atop of them. Her eyes were glazed over, barely registering the sight of whatever was playing on the television across the counter.

"You seem excited for the first day," Hopper commented, saddling up in the seat next to hers before placing his order.

The only response he received was an exaggerated groan while she dramatically plopped her forehead down on her perched arms.

"Adults are the worst," came a muffled reply from behind her arms.

"It can't be that bad," Hopper tried while lighting himself a cigarette.

She finally sat up with a huff and crossed her arms. "It really is. Kids are one thing, but parents..." she took a long draw from the drink in front of her. "Parents can't fathom that their children are anything less than angels when they aren't watching."

Hopper nodded his head in understanding while taking a swing of his own drink.

"I bet you were a real troublemaker in school," she commented, finally looking at him.

"You're not wrong," he admitted with a chuckle. "What kind of shenanigans did you get into as a kid," she questioned.

Hopper took a moment to categorize all the youthful misdeeds in his head before settling on one, "my mom thought I was on the debate team when really I was just screwing Chrissy Carpenter in the back of my dad's Oldsmobile at the old junkyard."

This drew a hearty laugh from her chest, "so your licentiousness is historic?" Hopper cocked his head at her in confusion; sometimes that girl knew too many words for her own good.



"Slut, I'm saying you've always been a slut," she said with a cocky grin from behind her beer. "Shut up," was the only retort he had to the accusation, "I bet you never got into any trouble in school."

"You'd be right," she nodded while licking her lips, "I was downright saintly." That declaration earned her a skeptical look. "Alright, not exactly saintly," she conceded, "but I kept my head down. I was an athlete, so I had to keep my act together, for the most part."

"Oh yeah," he replied while stubbing out his first cigarette before reaching for a second, "what sport?"

"Swimming. I was actually pretty good at it," she answered matter of factly. "I didn't know that about you," Hopper observed. "There's plenty you don't know about me, Chief," she concluded.

Parent Teacher night wasn't the worst as Ana had declared, but it wasn't exactly fun either. Every adult either wanted to waylay her with an extensive history of their child or ask her a million questions she didn't have any answers to. Didn't they know she was new to the school and the state?

She'd fumbled her way through though, embodying her personal motto of 'fake it till you make it.' There were too many kids and parents to bother remembering all of them; however, there were a few Ana had made an effort to pay extra attention to.

On one of her semi-regular dinners with Scott Clarke and Jen, Ana had been made aware of a few of Hawkins Middle's best and brightest. Mike Wheeler, Dustin Henderson, Lucas Sinclair, and Will Byers were four kids who clearly held a special place in the science teacher's heart. Members of his little AV club, Clarke said they were all good kids, albeit a bit rambunctious at times, his words.

So, on the first night, those were the parents she looked out for; trying to get a feel for what to expect come the first day of school.

Karen Wheeler was the first to approach her. A prim and proper woman, Mrs. Wheeler, was sweet, but a bit chatty for her taste. Ana chalked that up to Mr. Wheeler, probably not being much of a conversationalist. The matriarch of the Wheeler household reminded



Ana of her own mother in this sense: married to a man who didn't entirely give her the attention she craved, and who resided in a marriage that was more of a partnership based on raising children than one of romance at this point.

Next came the Sinclair's, dragging their youngest, Erica, in tow. The Sinclair girl seemed a handful, to say the least; she wasn't pleased in the least to be dragged along with her parents and made her frustration known. The family had spoken with Ms. Thompson long enough to know she'd be Lucas' teacher for the year before highailing it out of there before Erica could thoroughly make a scene. Ana was confident she'd end up with the second Sinclair child in her class in a few years, assuming she lasted that long in Hawkins.

Meeting Mrs. Henderson was less stressful, comparatively, but equally as impressive. Claudia Henderson was the personification of a cat lady; there was no doubt about it. She's managed to corner Ana for the better part of twenty minutes talking about, well, honestly, Ana couldn't follow. She'd nodded her head politely while the women went on, mostly speaking to herself, and finally stopped her with one hand on the shoulder, and a, "I'm excited to have Dustin in class," before fleeing the vicinity.

Will Byers' mother was a no show. Scott had warned Ana that this was a possibility; giving her a brief rundown of the boys tumultuous home life. Mr. Byers was an absentee father at best, more of a sperm donor than anything, from what she gathered. Leaving Joyce Byers stretched thin, trying to care for two boys by herself. Ana pitied her in that sense; believing parents shouldn't abandon their children regardless of their personal failings.

Ana had ended up drinking her two beers at the bar alone that night, no Hopper in sight, ruminating over what she'd learned about the town and its occupants that evening.

**We're so close to the beginning of the series that I can taste it.**



## 9. Chapter 9

"Ok, let's start by making a few things very clear. First, I am not a cool teacher. The sooner you accept that the easier things will be for all of us. Second, boys, and I do mean all of you boys, no touching each other. I don't know why y' all want to hit, slap, and pinch each other every chance you get, but I'm not here for it. Stop it. Are we clear?" There was deft nodding in return.

"Alright," Ana said, clapping her hands and rubbing them together in anticipation. "Then my names Ms. Thompson, and it's gonna be a good year."

That's how each new class period began; Ana established her irrefutable authority inside the room, and the students seemed to fall in line behind it. Well, most of the kids. Ana had been doing the job long enough to spot troublemakers right off the bat; Troy and James fit the bill perfectly. She'd have her work cut out for her breaking those two punks in.

It wasn't until 4th period that the infamous AV crew graced her with their presence. The foursome reminded Ana of the boys from Stephen King's novella *The Body*. A ragtag group of kids attached at the hip, who, more often than not, found themselves wrapped up in some monkey business. They'd glanced at each other in an exceptionally bashful manner when she'd mentioned male students affinities for whacking one another.

And so, Ana Thompson's banal existence in Hawkins, Indiana commenced. She'd wake up every weekday and head to her job teaching middle school students how to improve their reading and writing. Then, in the evenings, she'd head home to an empty house and wait till the next day came around.

Every Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday night she'd end at Benny's Burgers and after, the local bar down the block.

It was a simple, consistent, and predictable existence, which was fine by her. Nothing of particular interest happened those few months, except the occasional run-in with Jim Hopper over drinks.



She should have known that this level of peace never lasted in her life. Nothing stayed simple forever.

**I'm about to turn this up to 11, pun intended.**



## 10. Chapter 10

Sunday, November 6th, started as a day of celebration.

Ana Thompson woke up late that morning; one year older than the day before. She'd spoken to her parents back in Texas, whom both wished her a happy birthday, then spent the rest of the day lounging around and doing whatever she pleased.

Continuing through her usual Sunday evening routine, Ana had moseyed into the local burger joint at 6:00 PM sharp and was greeted with a chorus of happy birthday from the patrons and owner. Benny had even baked her a special chocolate cake, delivering it to the table before announcing, "Thirty-one. Guess it's time for you to settle down."

She snorted at this. "Not if I can help it," she said while sending him a wink.

She'd received a similar greeting from the bar crowd upon arrival, quickly seating herself next to Hopper at the countertop. "This for me," she'd questioned, gesturing towards the second beer resting next to the one he was currently sipping on. "You shouldn't have," she said and took it without waiting for a reply.

"Figured it was the least I could do for the birthday girl. How does it feel to be getting old?" His smirk was contagious.

"You'd know all about getting old, wouldn't you," she shot back.

"I'm hurt, Thompson," he said, placing his right hand over his heart in mock injury. "Wounded, I'm sure," was her acknowledgment.

"We properly celebrating tonight? None of this, two beer maximum for once?" He asked a fair question; it was her birthday after all. However, a voice in the back of her head warned that she had set that limit for a reason. That she knew exactly how bad things could get, exactly how bad she could make them get if she wasn't careful.

"Come on, live a little," he whispered, leaning forward and nudging



her thigh with his knee. He left his offending appendage there and that, the lingering contact, was all it took for her resolve to crumble like a paper doll.

"Fine, but remember, this is what you asked for." She chugged the first beer with a speed that impressed the chief enough to offer her a 'whoop' as praise. She set the now empty glass down on the bartop, a look of distaste gracing her features, while Hopper ordered a round of shots.

Ana knew she was in for it.

"So tell me, what was it like seeing Buddy Holly live in concert?" She'd had several stand-alone drinks and even more shots at this point. No longer was Ana even attempting to squash her impulsive need to be a smartass, and, even worse, she was starting to get handsy. This probably explained why her left hand was now resting on Hopper's right thigh, just a bit too high up to be either appropriate or merely friendly.

"You've got a real smart mouth; you know that," he countered while placing his right hand on the back of her chair, effectively caging him between the counter and himself, her shoulder gently grazing his forearm.

"Oh, my mouth can do plenty of things other than being smart," she implied, their eyes searing into one another's.

Before long it was 2:00 AM and they were ordered to vacate the premises. No other customers were around as they walked out into the parking lot; it seems all the responsible citizens of Hawkins had long since returned to their homes.

Hopper's arm was slung loosely over her shoulders while hers was wrapped tightly around his waist, trying to maintain some sense of balance while on her unsteady feet.

"You finally coming home with me tonight, or what?" His question wasn't out of line, they were both drunk and had been openly flirting all night. However, the moment it was spoken into reality, the spell was broken.



She pushed away from him roughly, "is that all this is to you? Just a game of waiting me out? That's really shitty, you know. I am more than just another warm hole for the night, in case you hadn't noticed."

She'd done such a quick 180 and stormed away from him that her hair whipped around behind her and smacked him in the chest.

"I know that, Ana, I know that," he called after her desperately. In an effort to stop her from stomping away, he grabbed her arm, which she roughly shrugged off with a, "whatever."

What the fuck was she doing? Honestly, she had no decent answer to that question. Did she want Hopper? The answer was an emphatic, yes. Yet, here she was making a downright scene at just the mere mention of the thing they were both aching for.

"Where are you even going? Ana, you can't drive home like this," he tried to reason while jogging down the street after her in an attempt to keep up.

"I'll have Benny drive me home. Hell, maybe I'll even blow him for his trouble." She was just being obstinate now for the sake of being obstinate, "at least he's been decent enough not to try and solicit anything from me."

Why the fuck would she even say that? Tomorrow, she'd be ashamed of the level of outlandishness she was exhibiting. For tonight though, she was drunk, angry and most importantly, insecure; and there was no stopping this train from fully falling off the tracks.

Benny has thankfully still been at work and had obliged in driving her home after closing up shop, and the ride to hers had been filled with a tense silence. She didn't need to say much; he could tell she was pissed just by the look on her face. And Ana had used that quiet time to grapple with what it was she was planning on doing next.

Ultimately her better sense didn't prevail, and once they'd arrived at her home, Ana had invited Benny to stay the night. She knew it wasn't the right decision; she knew that before extending the offer, but she was committed to self-destructing; everything and everyone



else be damned.

While Ana was busy trying to bury her feelings with a physical distraction, Hopper was stumbling into his own home by the lake. Only making it as far as the living room before face planting into his old and torn up couch, where he would remain until the harsh light of morning.

Sunday, November 6th, ended as a day of misery. And, it was only going to get worse from there because in the darkness on the other side of town, Will Byers had just become the first victim of the strange events that were about to descend upon the city of Hawkins, Indiana like a plague.

**Y'all weren't ready for it.**



## 11. Chapter 11

The sun blazed in through her bedroom windows with such an intensity that Ana was confident it was pissed at her for the previous evening as well.

She woke in bed alone, probably for the best, less awkward that way, and not a single part of her didn't groan in pain as she adjusted to a sitting position.

'Todays gonna be a real bitch,' she thought to herself but had no way of knowing just how right she was.

Her truck was thankfully parked in the drive; she didn't bother pondering how it had gotten there or when just happy it was one less problem she'd have to remedy that day.

Totting around the most massive coffee cup she could conjure, Ana headed into work thoroughly regretting not just calling in sick. She wasn't sure which was going to kill her first, the hangover or the shame.

Making a beeline towards the teacher's lounge upon arrival, Ana intended to refill her rapidly depleting caffeine stock and go about her day in misery. Instead, she walked in on Scott Clarke bragging to another science teacher about some giant radio the school had bought; it could reach all the way to Australia, apparently.

She did not have time for this level of nerdiness, not this early in the morning and not while nursing a splitting headache.

"Have you found someone else to talk to on the other end, or are you just going to let the kids talk to whatever random person answers?" Scott's face visibly fell, "I hadn't thought of that."

Ana topped off her mug before heading out the door, "perverts, Scott. You've got to be wary of perverts. Who else just randomly sits around listening to a giant radio" and she was gone.

Now, short of telling her students to sit down and shut up, Ana made



it abundantly clear that today was not the day to trifle with her, before handing out a worksheet and sitting back at her desk to sulk.

Things passed quickly and quietly in this manner, for the most part, until 4th period when most of the AV crew rolled into her class. "Where's Will," she'd questioned, as this was the first time all year she'd seen them as anything less than a foursome. She only received shrugs and murmurs of ignorance before the rest of the class shuffled in, and no one thought of the boys' absence any further.

It wasn't until her lunch break when the day really took a turn from bad to worse.

Ana was heading down to the front office, thinking of bribing the principal's secretary into finding a sub so she could go home early when she encountered Mr. Coleman, Hopper, Callahan, and Powell in the hallway.

The look on Hopper's face was so determined and yet so...frightened, was that the right word? That for a moment she'd forgotten all about their altercation the night before, and stopped him with a light hand on the shoulder before he could pass her by, "what's going on?"

Her selective amnesia lifted real quick though, as Hopper observed her hand, touching his shoulder and raised his eyes to her own. She removed her palm quicker than if it had been a hot stove she was touching.

He squinted his eyes at her and seriously considered telling her to just fuck off, that it wasn't any of her business and that he had no desire to converse with her at all. That wasn't fair though; the situation could escalate to their needing her help. So, instead, he muttered a quick, "Will Byers is missing," and continued to his intended destination with the company in tow.

Throughout the remainder of the day, you could feel it in the air that something was very, very wrong.

After the last bell rang, Scott popped his head into her room and informed Ana that a search party was being headed. They were going to look for Will Byers, who was officially missing and needed



volunteers. Ana agreed to meet up with him after stopping by her house to dress into something more appropriate for the long hike they were anticipating.

She'd driven home at an inappropriate speed, not that she was going to be pulled over with Hawkins PD otherwise occupied, and tore through her place like a hurricane in an effort to change and head out as quickly as possible.

On her way out the door, she took note of the blinking light on her answering machine. Figuring it was nothing more than her mother calling to ask how her birthday had gone, she thought nothing of it and rushed out of the house to join the search party looking for Will Byers.

With flashlights in hand, Ana and Scott walked side by side through the dense trees in hopes of locating the mislaid boy.

"Maybe Will just got lost in the woods," Scott commented, more a hypothetical question than anything. "We can only hope." God, was she shit at being comforting.

The conversation died between them and the other volunteers as the night grew darker and colder, only the sounds of Will's name being called filled the air. At one point the pair came up behind Hopper. While Scott approached the chief, Ana choice to hang back; no need to exacerbate an already bad situation.

"He's a good student," Clarke stated approaching the police chief, an ill-fated attempt to be helpful. Hopper turned towards the source of the comment and asked, "what?"

"Will. He's a good student," Clarke restated. "Great one, actually. I don't think we've met. Scott Clarke. Teacher, Hawkins Middle. Earth and Biology."

Ana lingered back enough to watch the interaction, seeing Hopper accept Clarke's hand in introduction.

"I always had a distaste for science," came Hopper's follow up. "Well, maybe you had a bad teacher," was Clarke's optimistic reply to Jim's



apparent cynicism. Ana could never hope to be half as cheerful as that man was.

"Yeah, Ms. Ratliff was a piece of work," Hopper responded, offering his bare minimum to the continued conversation between them. "Ratliff? You bet. She's still kicking around, believe it or not," Clarke replied with a light chuckle despite the grave predicament.

"Oh, I believe it. Mummies never die, or so they tell me. Sara, my daughter. Galaxies, the universe, whatnot: She always understood all that stuff. I always figured there was enough going on down here; I never needed to look elsewhere."

Ana nearly tripped over her own damn feet, hearing those words leave Hopper's mouth. HIS DAUGHTER? In all the months she'd known him, not once had he ever mentioned having a daughter. She was starting to wonder if she even knew the person walking in front of her at all.

Clarke continued though, utterly ignorant to the epiphany washing over his co-worker behind him. "Your daughter, what grade is she? Maybe I'll get her in my class."

Ana's ears felt hot, and she could literally hear the blood rushing through her skull. This wasn't a conversation she was meant to hear. She shouldn't be eavesdropping, didn't want to be eavesdropping anymore, and yet; she couldn't bring herself to turn away.

"No, she, uh, she lives with her mom in the city," Hopper replied shiftily. He turned and looked back at Clarke and then, over the other man's shoulder to Ana. She'd been seen, been caught, and there was no doubt that Hopper now knew she'd been privy to their seemingly private conversation.

"Thanks for coming out, teach. We really appreciate it," he said, picking up the pace and was quickly gone.

Ana's mouth was suddenly dry, and yet her hands were extremely sweaty. Had she stepped into an alternate dimension? What the FUCK was going on here? They were in the woods, searching for a student of hers that had gone missing and now she was finding out that the



man she had almost gone home with last night was someone's father. All of this seemed like some crazy fever dream. But, here she was, freezing her ass off in the middle of a search party, feeling every bit of the panic that told her none of this could exist only in her mind.

"She died a few years back," came the intrusion from some random woman. "Sorry?" Clarke voiced enough confusion for both of them. "His kid," concluded the woman.

Her addition was the last piece of the puzzle. Hopper's omissions, his drinking, hell, his sleeping around all came crashing down on her with harsh clarity. The situation wasn't better for her understanding, though. If anything, it made her more of an asshole.

**The series is officially upon us.**



## 12. Chapter 12

The next day at school was a complete and utter wash. How can you expect children to focus on classwork when something so traumatic is happening around them?

Will Byers seat was left noticeably empty in her 4th period class, and neither Ana nor the students could stop their eyes from being drawn to it. However, his was not the only seat left vacant that day.

Ana waited until the end of class bell rang before calling Dustin and Lucas to her desk. "Boys, why wasn't Mike here today," she asked, pinning them down with a scrutinizing stare.

The preteens glanced at each other and fumbled over their words for a few moments before settling on a synchronized, "we don't know."

"You're both terrible liars; you know that?" It wasn't as much a question as a statement. "Whatever is going on," she said with a wave of the hand, "you know you can tell me, or any adult, right? Especially if it's something that can help your friend."

The boys shared another, more significant glance before turning back to her. "We know that, Ms. Thompson," Lucas answered for both of them. She swept her eyes over the pair one last time before sighing, "ok, you can go then." They hightailed it out of there as soon as they got the go ahead.

Other than hearing the PA announcing that there would be an assembly happening on the football field at 8:00 PM in support of Will Byers and his family, the rest of the day passed by in a daze.

Things were not passing as uneventfully for Hopper though. Midway through the day search party, he'd received an urgent call from Flo redirecting him to Benny's Burgers.

Being a cop should have prepared him for the worst life has to offer. Watching his daughter perish before his eyes should have made facing death easier. There is no preparation for losing anyone, though, and no amount of experience makes death any easier to



accept or less painful to face.

"Who's gonna tell, Thompson," Callahan asked, interrupting his increasingly solemn thoughts. "Pretty sure they were banging."

Hopper turned on his inferior with a barely contained fury. "A man just died, try and show a little class," he fumed before storming out of the establishment.

Callahan had the decency to look abashed when he turned to Officer Calvin Powell, who merely shook his head in disappointment and walked away as well.

The burden of being the messenger ultimately fell upon Scott Clarke, purely by accident. Ana was getting into her truck at the end of the day when the science teacher had run up to her, short of breath.

"Ana," he had called to stop her from leaving, and once he was finally close enough to her, "I'm sorry to hear about Benny."

"What are you talking about," she asked baffled, which caused him to flounder for a moment. Did she really not know yet?

"Benny, I was sorry to hear about what happened to him." He said it as though speaking the same words in a different order would strike some sort of realization into her. Instead, the continued lack of understanding just pissed her off.

"What about Benny, Scott? You better start making sense real quick," she said while taking a menacing step closer to him. He retreated one step in return. "I thought someone would have told you already..." he tapered off, not knowing how to break the news.

"Tell me what," she practically yelled, causing more than a few passersby

to stop in their tracks and observe the interaction between the two.

"Benny...he died," Scott practically whispered. "I thought you already knew," he added as though it was some consolation.

She felt the air leave her lungs with such force that it physically hurt.



Her eyes started watering of their own accord, but she'd be damned if anyone was going to see her cry. Especially not the small crowd that had gathered in anticipation of her reaction. Without saying another word, she climbed into her truck and slammed the door shut behind her, throwing the car into gear and peeling out of the school parking lot.

She was going to find Hopper, and he was going to explain to her exactly what the hell was going on.

Finding Hopper was easier said than done, though. He was avoiding Ana by any means necessary and doing a marvelous job of it. He could have been the one to inform her of Benny's demise, he should have been the one, but at the end of the day, he couldn't bring himself to do it.

He was afraid of what he'd see in her eyes once he broke the news; would she be grief stricken for her friend, or heartbroken over something more? He wasn't ready to face that answer yet, not when Will Byers was still nowhere to be found.

She had eventually cornered him though after Scott had found the ripped piece of fabric in the drain tunnel, and after the officers had followed that tunnel to the restricted area outside Hawkins National Laboratory. There, along the chain link fence, she pushed past Callahan and Powell, right up to Hopper.

"I need to talk to you NOW," she delivered that short sentence with such an air of authority that it was no wonder middle schoolers fell in line behind her. "Not now," Hopper had brushed her off both verbally and physically as he went to walk past her. "It wasn't a question," she argued, wrapping a firm hand around his bicep to stop him from getting much further.

"I don't have the time for this," he seethed, leaning down to deliver a firm glare at eye level. "Then find the time," she challenged through clenched teeth. "None of this," he gestured wildly around them, "none of this is about you. So, I'm sorry if I don't have the time to watch you make a scene." After delivering that cruel blow, he'd shrugged off her hand and trudged back through the forest, leaving her alone.



The day, all of it had been too much for Hopper to handle sober and alone that night. He'd called Sandra, one of the locals, to come over in an effort to deaden all the doubting voices circulating in his head. It had worked, for a time, but sleep never came, and in its absence, guilt crept into the recesses of his mind.

He wanted to know what was wrong with him, why nothing in his life could ever be simple or happy. Standing on the porch, Sandra nor himself were able to provide that answer. So, instead of following her back into the warmth his place as promised, he'd silently grabbed his car keys and driven to the old Mooney house just on the outskirts of town.

He wasn't surprised that lights were still on inside the home, despite the ridiculously late hour. She'd long ago confided in him that sleep often alluded her, and she stayed up well into the early hours most days; reading until her body quit out of sheer exhaustion.

Hopper got out of his car and knocked gently, loud enough to be heard but not so loud as to startle the occupant. It took a few moments, but eventually, Ana appeared behind the door, visibly exhausted. Neither said anything for a moment, instead, appraising one another in the dim glow of her porch light.

"You ever feel cursed," he questioned for the second time that night. Ana sighed in return and retreated into the house, not expressly inviting him into her home, but leaving the door open as to allow him the choice to invite himself in.

She waited until they were both seated at opposite ends of her overstuffed couch before tackling his daunting question. Ana tucked her knees underneath herself and reasoned that "guilt is just a way of making a sad situation about yourself. I think that believing you're cursed is just another way of saying you feel guilty."

"I do feel guilty," he whispered. "We all do," she reasoned back, "it's just a matter of whether or not you've earned it."

"You know, the last person to go missing here was in the summer of '23. The last suicide was in the fall of '61." She'd never seen him look as broken as he did then.



"Did you make them go missing? Did you make them kill themselves?" She attempted logic to ease his palpable anguish, "sometimes, bad things just happen. That doesn't make them your fault."

"Benny killed himself," he couldn't look her in the eyes after giving those words life. The air between them shifted instantly, instead of contemplative, it became harsh. Her response was short, "no, he didn't."

Her contradiction infuriated him; for once in her life, why couldn't she let something be easy? "Yes, he did. I was there. I saw him," he said, straightening himself up on the couch as though bracing himself for the inevitable fight.

"No, he didn't," she repeated, except this time through clenched teeth. "Oh yeah, and how can you be so sure?" She had an answer for him, but it wasn't going to be a satisfying one.

"Go on then," he continued, openly glowering at her now, "tell me what it is that makes you know better than a law enforcement officer."

"I'm not such a bad lay that people go and off themselves immediately after."

She regretted it the moment the words left her lips, it was abrasive, crude, and most importantly, insensitive. Hopper just kept enraging her beyond the point of sense.

"Fuck this," he said, lifting his body from her couch and began heading for the door. She followed as if to stop him from retreating, but no words came to mind that could salvage anything now, so she let him go out the door.

Her blood was beyond the point of boiling now. It had been building since two nights ago, but this, this was her tipping point.

There, sitting on the table by the door, was her answering machine with its red light that wouldn't stop fucking blinking at her. Now, it felt as though the persistent light were mocking her. At that moment,



she took all the anger she couldn't correctly express out on that stupid little machine; Viciously backhanding it off the table's surface.

Upon hitting the ground, in a clatter of plastic and metal, the message whose light had been taunting her began to play. It wasn't her mother's voice playing back at her, as she had assumed it would be. Instead, Benny's gruff voice sounded out of the machine, stopping her dead in her tracks.

"Hey, I know you're at work right now, but I might need your help. This little girl showed up here, and I think she's in some sort of trouble. I've put in a call to Social Services, but I figured you'd know what to do with her in the meantime. Call me back or stop by as soon as you can. Thanks....," and the line went dead.

Ana's feet were carrying her to the door before her mind could even register their movement. With both hands pressed upon the doorframe, she'd screamed Hopper's name into the night, stopping all progress before he could reach his car.



## 13. Chapter 13

Rushing back into the house, Hopper had listened to Benny's message for himself. All animosity between the two dissipated immediately upon the shared realization that this changed everything.

"Something else is going on here," he conceded while beginning to pace around her living room. "Someone shot Benny, put the gun in his hand and staged it to look like a suicide,"

"What did you say," she asked, stopping him short. Her confusion spurred his own confusion, "what?"

"What did you say about the gun," she tried again. "The gun, it was in Benny's hand, making it look like a suicide" he responded; this only confirmed her suspicions.

Ana let out a bark of laughter, although the current situation was anything but funny. "Well, that's the first mistake." The look of perplexity on Hopper's face didn't let up.

"You're a cop, how do you not know this?" His reply was a scoff of indignation. "When someone shoots themselves, they don't hold onto the gun after. It's like going boneless; you can't clutch on to shit." She'd pronounced this as if it were public knowledge, information that everyone should be privy to.

"The better question is, how do you even know that?" She paused for a moment. Tonight was all about revelations, now what's it?

"My aunt committed suicide when I was ten," she replied tonelessly, "I found her."

The air between them became thick. She took on a faraway look, avoiding eye contact, and he grappled for something, anything to say.

"Ana, I'm sorry," was the best he could conjure after releasing a heavy breath. "It was a long time ago," she replied snapping back into the moment, but still not fully returning to herself.

"You're not the only one who feels cursed sometimes," she muttered,



heading off into the kitchen to produce some alcohol that would numb the pain to the point of bearability.

Ana had returned with a can of beer in each hand, passing the second off to Hopper who cracked it open swiftly and drank from it greedily. "So what about this little girl..."

Did Ana Thompson show up to her teaching job on Wednesday, November 9? Yes. Did she get much accomplished while there? Who's to say. She'd definitely delivered a lecture over the symbolism of *The Lonely Mountain* in J.R.R. Tolkien's, *The Hobbit*. What she'd specifically ordained to the kids in her class that day though, was all but a mystery to her.

Everyone's thoughts were elsewhere these days, and most were just going through the motions to make it to the next day.

Ana had, however, received a message from the front office towards the end of the school day, indicating that there had been a call for her. The slip of paper passed to her from one of the student aids read simply: 'meet at the library.'

And that's precisely where she'd headed once her work day concluded; parking alongside the chief's patrol car just as he and Powell exited the vehicle.

Vacating her automobile, she questioned, "what's up," while falling into step astride the officers. "Hawkins Lab is hiding something," came the terse reply from Hopper, "need you here for research." She'd nodded her head and questioned it no further as they entered the building.

"Hey, Marissa. How you doin'," Hopper offered warmly as the crew approached the reception desk. The response he received in kind was not equally as warm, "you have a lot of nerve showing up here."

Oh, shit. Ana saw exactly where this was going and hung back at the doors. Hopper wasn't quite as quick to the draw and asked in a stupefied manner, "what?"

The hand cocked back, the head tilt; all the signs were there, Hopper



was about to receive a severe tongue lashing, and he was none the wiser.

"You could have at least called, said, "Marissa! Hey, it's not gonna work out. Sorry I wasted your time. I'm a dick." The inflection Marissa placed on the word 'dick' nearly broke Ana, and she had to turn her head into her shoulder in an effort to try and contain the laughter that was rapidly rising from her throat.

"Yep," with an astute nod, was the response Hopper gave in return. Not bad, Ana thought, at least he wasn't trying to make excuses for his poor behavior. Ownership is always the best bet.

The two seemed to share a nod of understanding before Hopper let out an embarrassed sigh, "I'm sorry."

Okay, maybe there was hope of smoothing the whole situation over without any lingering bitterness.

"Uh, maybe we could go out again next week?" Never mind, this man was retarded.

Marissa looked to Powell as if to say, 'is he serious?' Powell, looked to Hopper as if to say, 'are you this dumb?' And Ana, she looked to the ceiling, willing herself not to tear up from the physical effort it was taking to contain a snort from leaving her body.

In the ensuing silence, Hopper suddenly remembered how non-verbal cues worked and changed the subject. "Newspapers? You got newspapers around here?"

Marissa had begrudgingly left her desk and led the threesome to a rack of shelves that contained all the information they were seeking. "We have the New York Times, the Post, all the big ones. Organized by year and topic. You can find the corresponding microfiche in the reading room," she'd indicated with a finger over her shoulder.

"Okay, we're looking for anything on the Hawkins National Laboratory," Hopper informed her. "Well, shouldn't you be looking for that missing kid," Marissa questioned, not making the connection. "Yeah. We are," he responded as if it were the next logical step. "Uh,



so, why don't you start with the Times, and we'll check out the Post."

Marissa gave a resentful scoff at the assumption that she would be doing anything with Hopper, and looked to Powell for support. Ana could only shake her head in disbelief at Hopper's astounding thickness.

Marissa, who was visibly beyond done with Hopper's idiocracy by this point, turned to walk away from the crew. However, she stopped just short of Ana in her path away from them. "Watch out for that one, he'll leave you high and dry," she said while jutting her chin in Hopper's direction.

"Oh no, it's not like that," Ana had tried to assure the older woman. All she'd received was a disbelieving 'humph' in return before the librarian abandoned them altogether.

"The librarian," came Powell's judgmental inquiry to his boss. Hopper could only give a noncommittal shrug in reply.

Ana had ended up taking the Times in Marissa's stead, the group pouring over article after article for the next several hours.

"I think I've found something," Ana had announced a few hours into researching. Displayed on her machine was a feature revolving around a woman named Terry Ives.

Terry claimed that, while participating in a government experiment called Project MKUltra in the 70s, she'd learned she was pregnant. The story went on to say that although the scientists conducting the experiments reported that Terry had miscarried, she believed her child had instead been taken away and subjected to further experiments.

Hopper seemed intrigued, but Powell, not so much. "I don't know. Are we looking for this lady's missing kid or Will Byers?"

"The two don't have to be mutually exclusive," Ana had muttered while continuing to read through the article.

"This lady, Terry Ives, sounds like a real nut to me," Powell said, doubling down on his disbelief. "Her kid was taken for LSD mind



control experiments? She's been discredited. Claim was thrown out-"

Hopper decided to interrupt his inferiors tangent there, "okay, forget about her. Take a look at this." He slid a printout across the table and pointed towards the image upon it, "Dr. Martin Brenner. Brenner. He runs Hawkins Lab."

Powell still wasn't sold on the river Hopper was rapidly heading down. "You don't find that interesting," Ana had tried to back him up.

"Not really." Well, that attempt failed. "He was involved in some hippie crap back in the day, so what?" Hopper and Ana shared a disbelieving glance; why wasn't he seeing what they were seeing?

"No, this isn't hippie crap. This is CIA-sanctioned research." Hopper was getting agitated now, as one could infer by the way he readjusted himself at the table, leaning further across it towards his nonplussed co-worker.

"Doesn't mean he had anything to do with our kid," Powell challenged further. "Come on. Look at that. Hospital gowns. All of 'em," Hopper went back to analyzing the image. "Now, that piece of fabric that the teacher found by the pipe. That sure looked like a hospital gown to me, huh? Am I wrong?"

"You're not," and "I don't know, Chief," were the two contradicting answers Hopper had received from his companions.

Letting out an exasperated sigh as he leaned back in the chair, Hopper tried one final time: "Come on, man. Work with me here. I'm not saying that there's some grand conspiracy. I'm just saying maybe something happened. Maybe Will was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and he saw something that he shouldn't have."

Ana nodded emphatically in agreement, but ever the negative Nancy, Powell said, "it's a reach." "It's a start," Hopper shot back.

After that, Powell's radio had gone off asking for the chief. The message received was one that had both officers running out of the library and into the darkening night.

A body had been found in the quarry.



Before starting the patrol car and screeching out of the parking lot with sirens on, Hopper had chanced a glance back at Ana. Go directly home and nowhere else had been his strict instructions, and for once in her life, she actually did as she was told.

**Real talk: Life gets hard for everyone sometimes, but no one is ever alone. If you're ever feeling hopeless than speak to someone about it, anyone. Hell, even if it's a person you feel a connection with on an online writing website. There's not a human out there who isn't willing to help someone in their time of need.**

**Empathy is something we could all benefit from showing a little more to those around us.**

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255**



## 14. Chapter 14

News of the discovery of Will Byers' body monopolized all news media that night.

Ana had only known the boy for a short time, but his death caused grief to settle upon her nonetheless. And so, she drank and cried in the privacy of her own home that evening. Feeling more alone than ever before.

The untimely death of anyone is a loss to the world. The demise of someone so young though isn't just a loss of life; it's a loss of potential. The things they could have grown to be, what they could have added to the world around them, the mistakes they could have made and learned from, all gone in an instant.

The following day was a shit show. The assembly was a joke, one she skipped witnessing altogether. And, to top it all off, someone had set off the fire alarm causing all students and staff to vacate the premises. Ana had ended up back home that night wondering why she'd even bothered with the day, to begin with.

Having every intention of repeating her previous evenings means of coping, Ana had barely settled into her couch with a drink in hand when a loud knock sounded on her front door.

She wasn't surprised by Hopper's presence at her home, but the frantic look in his eyes gave her pause.

"Are you alone," he questioned, looking around the obviously empty house frenziedly. "Yeah, why wouldn't I be," she had asked back perturbed.

He's rounded on her then, grabbing onto both of her shoulders a bit more roughly than intended. "None of it's been real; it's all been a lie." He was leaning down now, so they were eye to eye, hardly a breath separated them.

"Slow down," she said, placing her hands over his in an attempt to loosen the firm grip he held on her shoulders. "Explain to me what's



going on."

But, then she felt them, the already forming scabs on his knuckles. Holding his hands in her own, she observed them further, brushing her thumbs over the red and raw skin she found there. "How did this happen?"

Honestly, Ana could guess how the marks came to be, but there were apparent details that she was missing. Questions with answers that only Hopper could provide, but he wasn't in the right frame of mind to articulate them to her just yet.

"Will Byers' body was a fake. It's all been a setup," he whispered with eyes blazing into her own. It's not that she didn't believe him, but he needed to help her understand; "how can you know for sure?"

"I cut open the body." Ana's eyes nearly bulged out of her head; she instantly dropped Hopper's hands and backed away from him. "WHAT?"

"It was filled with stuffing. Someone is going through a lot of trouble to cover up his disappearance," Hopper said with more clarity than anything else that had come out of his mouth that evening.

"Oh, thank god," was how she'd expressed her relief. Then she punched him in the shoulder, hard. "Lead with that next time, you idiot." It was a brief respite from the seriousness of the conversation, but it didn't last more than a moment.

"What're we going to do now?" Her question hung over them like a wet blanket.

"We're not going to do anything. I'm going to Hawkins Lab to get some answers, and you're going to stay here." She openly scoffed at his assumption, "wrong. I'm coming along."

Hopper was back in her face in an instant, hands returning to grasp her shoulders with a touch that was anything but gentle. "I need you here, and I need you safe." He'd given her shoulders a shake for good measure, but she wasn't deterred, and he shouldn't have been surprised.



"If you didn't want me to come, then you shouldn't have told me where you were going." Damn was she infuriating.

"This is something I have to do alone," he tried to reason with her. "But, if I don't make it back, I need you to know that."

She had no intention of letting him finish whatever sentiment it was that he was trying to express.

"I'm going with you to Hawkins Lab, and I'm going to watch your back. That's final."

Ana had proclaimed this as though it were gospel, then headed to the closest end table. Opening the top drawer sharply, she produced a revolver from within its depths, which she quickly tucked into the back of her jeans before returning to him.

"You have a gun," he asked baffled. She had tsked in response to his bewilderment and stated the obvious, "I'm from Texas."

Hopper gave up fighting her after that. It became apparent he had only two options: either let her come, and he'd be able to watch out for her, or she'd go alone and get herself into god only knows what kind of trouble. He chose to settle for the former.

Breaking into the facility wasn't the hard part, concerningly, what to do once inside was the challenge.

Hopper led the charge, strategically keeping Ana behind him should they run into any trouble in their pursuit of answers. Trouble was going to be inevitable; they were trespassing in a secure government facility after all; however, he would try his best to minimize any damage caused to her in the process.

They'd slinked through the building as quiet as mice, hiding behind doors and around corners, any chance a worker came into view.

Then, they'd reached an area blocked off with a biohazard marker, attempting to warn people away. The worst was what they were searching for, right? The pair exchanged a poignant glance before Hopper unzipped the plastic barrier and they both stepped inside.



The first door they approached was locked; it looked like they'd need a key card to proceed any further. This wasn't the worst of their problems, though.

The sound of a gun cocking interrupted the heavy silence. "Hands up. Hands up," was the following command resonating through the hallway. Two men now stood behind the couple with guns raised towards them.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa," had come Hopper's response. In a duel move, he raised his hands in the air as a show of submission while also maneuvering Ana behind him, so she was now pressed against the locked doors. He was effectively placing himself between her and the armed men.

"Forget all the cameras, bub," mocked the man in a suit.

"Look, Dr. Brenner asked for me specifically. Okay? How else do you think I got in here?" He lied with such fluency that Ana would have been impressed had she not been presently willing herself to disappear. Hopper could try and justify why the local police chief was in the building this late at night, but there was no reasoning he could provide to validate the school teacher's presence too.

Suit guy didn't seem to be having it, and aggressively pulled a walkie from his belt; neither men lowered their guns while all four stood at a standstill.

"What's your name again," he questioned skeptically. "It's Jim Hopper. Chief Jim Hopper," he announced in a show of confidence.

The man started to say into the walkie: "yeah, I've got Jim Hopper-," but didn't get to finish the sentence before being pistol-whipped in the face.

"Come again," rang a voice on the other end of the walkie, but there was no one to respond now. The first man had fallen to the floor, where he stayed, and Jim had the other pressed against the wall with a gun to the face.

Taking the second man's gun, Hopper had blindly passed it off to Ana



behind him, who held it at the ready. Hopper's gun never wavered from the man's head, "hey, mind if I borrow this one," he said and took the man's key card off his shirt.

He'd tossed the card to Ana who swiped it while Hopper kept his gun trained on the two men who were now incapacitated. There was a beep followed by a buzz indicating that they had been granted access. Ana pulled open the door and hurried inside with Hopper following closely behind. The door closed and audibly locked behind them; then, Hopper shot the key card access for security.

The pair were plunged into darkness.

Ana and Hopper shuffled through the many chambers as quickly as possible, looking for anything that would be helpful in their search for Will.

Hopper's flashlight guided them through the darkness, but every room they came upon appeared to be emptier than the last until they found one of particular interest.

It almost looked like a kids room, a stuffed animal was sitting on the sheets, and an elementary drawing hung on the wall over the bed. What kind of kid could possibly live in these conditions? That question would go unanswered in the meantime.

The building's alarms were sounding now. Ana and Hopper knew they didn't have much time left and took off running until they reached an elevator. Hopper pressed the button hastily as the sound of footsteps approached them rapidly.

"Hopper...", Ana called warningly while he continued jabbing the button with his finger furiously.

The doors opened just as security rounded the corner. Hopper unceremoniously pushed Ana inside before stepping in himself. "Hey! Stop," the approaching men yelled, but it was too late, the elevator doors closed before they could reach the pair.

"We're so fucked, aren't we," Ana observed while breathing heavily. Her question garnered no response though, both knowing they were



in the homestretch now.

When the doors opened again, they were deposited into an eerie wasteland. It was cold and dark; flakes of something were floating all around them, and a stale smell lingered in the air. The lights ahead flickered and cracked ominously.

They ventured forward into the darkness regardless; needing to find Will Byers.

Then they saw it, this giant...thing, that had taken over the entire rear wall. "What the hell," Hopper voiced in confusion for the both of them.

It was a black web of sorts that appeared to be oozing and pulsating. Ana thought it looked like some demonic vine that was wrapping itself around the entire room. Hopper approached the spindly center and reached out his hand. "Don't," Ana had tried to stop him, but he was already groping the sticky substance in both wonder and horror.

Movement from behind the duo shook them out of their momentary stupor. Lest they forget, they were still in Hawkins Lab and still being pursued by armed guards. Both lifted their guns in search of the source of movement and quickly found it.

Men in hazmat suits were surrounding them from all directions. They'd reached Ana first, plunging a syringe into her neck before she could even get a shot off.

"Hey! Hey! Hey," was the last thing she heard from Hopper before being encased by darkness.



## 15. Chapter 15

This had to be death, was the first thought that came to Ana's mind after fading back into consciousness. No, she corrected herself after a moment; death was painless. This hurt too much to be death; this was something so much worse.

She begrudgingly opened her eyes to let the cruel light of day in. As her surroundings finally focused into view, a few things became abundantly clear: her head was attempting to split itself in two, she didn't recognize where she was at all, and her clammy cheek was stuck to whatever surface it rested upon.

Ana didn't dare attempt movement just yet, fearing a wave of nausea that would inevitably consume her when she did. Didn't end up mattering much though, as Hopper shot up into wakefulness with such force that he knocked her straight to the ground.

Apparently, a sweat-soaked Jim Hopper had been the surface she had previously been resting upon and had now been unceremoniously extracted from onto the floor.

He looked around in uncertainty, hardly taking in the sight of the woman now straightening herself up on the floor next to his couch; empty beer bottles, liquor bottles, and pill bottles littered his home.

Grabbing his gun from the coffee table, Hopper, breathing heavily, rushed out the front door in search of something to explain their jarring appearance at his home. The woods were empty, his car was parked out front, and no answers were in sight.

Inside, Ana had found the closest bathroom and promptly threw up in the toilet, which is where Hopper found her upon returning indoors. Frenetically, he checked his neck in the bathroom mirror for any marks before squatting down and appraising her own.

Ana had always bruised like a peach and the red dot already littered with discoloration was proof enough that last night had been real, not a drug and drink induced nightmare for either of them.



He grabbed the back of her neck then, and harshly pulled her face to his own. Leaning over Ana while she sat on the floor, cheek to cheek, Hopper whispered, barely audible into her ear: "we need to find the bug."

The next half hour consisted of the two effectively destroying his place in search of some proof that it wasn't all a conspiracy. Pictures were ripped off the walls; his telephone was smashed, lightbulbs were unscrewed and shattered, hell, even his couch was torn into for absolute certainty. Hopper had ultimately found what they were looking for, worked into the lap attached to his living room ceiling.

Filling a cup to the brim with water, he'd dunked the offending bug inside, disabling that particular threat for the moment.

Both sat on the floor, in the wreckage of Hopper's home, breathing heavily. Ana could admit, for once in her life, that she was scared. The government was an unstoppable wheel; if they were going to take it on, then there was a good chance they were going to be crushed underneath its turning.

Nimble, she reached across the carpet until she could grasp his hand in hers. She needed something to keep her brave, give her reassurance that they'd make it through this ordeal in one piece. He'd squeezed her hand in return, as a means of consolation.

Their moment had been interrupted by the sound of car tires coming up the drive. The engine cut off, doors were shut, and feet could be heard climbing the steps outside. Neither moved, holding their breath in anticipation.

A rough knock followed by, "hey, Chief," had them letting out a relieved sigh. Neither relaxed entirely though, as Hopper jumped up with gun in hand to open the door.

"Hey," he said, falling through the frame, slamming the door shut behind him. Ana was alone now, with nothing to do but listen to the conversation taking place on the other side of the wall.

"Jesus, Chief. You all right?" So, it was both Callahan and Powell that had shown up then.



"What are you doing here," is all Hopper responded with. "We tried calling, but-" "Yeah, the phone's dead," he said, cutting the other man off shortly.

There was a brief pause before Callahan tried switching tactics. "Hey, so Bev Mooney came in this morning all upset. Said that Dale and Henry went hunting yesterday and they didn't come back home."

"She thought they were on another binger, but she's not so sure now," added Powell. "I think this whole Will Byers thing has everybody on edge," Callahan concluded.

"Where was this," Hopper finally questioned. "It was at the station," Callahan answered foolishly.

"No, no. Where did Henry and Dale go hunting?" You could hear in his voice that Hopper was growing impatient now.

"Oh. Uh, out near Kerley." Fuck. That meant that the two men weren't just lost on a hunting trip like their wives thought.

Hopper was coming to the same conclusion on the other side of the door, which was apparent by his muttering, "Mirkwood."

"What?" The other two officers had not a single clue of the stranger things going on around town.

"Okay. You go back to the station. I'll take care of this, all right?" He was attempting to brush them off as quickly as possible, no need to get more people involved than already were.

"Are you sure?" Callahan asked. "Yeah, leave it," Hopper responded, trying to make it back inside where Ana was still waiting.

"Oh, hey. Uh, they found Barbara's car," Callahan added absentmindedly. That stopped Hopper in his retreat from them, "what?"

"Barbara Holland's car. Seems she ran away after all." Nope, wrong, Powell. "Staties found it late last night at a bus station."

"Funny, right? They keep doing our job for us." More like they keep



staging things for us, Callahan.

Hopper was following a similar train of thought. "Yeah. It's funny," he replied humorlessly before marching back inside and slamming the door closed behind him.

"Get up, I'm taking you home," he'd announced once certain they were alone again. Ana had obliged to the direct order without being combative, for once, which he appreciated. Neither had the energy to argue on the car ride over.

Parking outside of hers, Hopper shut off the engine and turned in his seat to face Ana, knowing what was coming next was the hard part.

"I need you to go inside, pack up your things, and go back to Texas." His mouth was set in a firm line, and his eyes were determined. She was visibly taken aback by the suggestion. "No."

He hadn't expected it to be easy, but he wasn't deterred. Hopper was going to make her see sense whether she liked it or not.

"Ana, you need to get out of here while you still can." The answer stayed the same, "no."

There it was, that agitated look that always fell upon his countenance whenever they stumbled into an argument. "I can't take care of you and find Will. I can't do both."

"Good thing I don't need you to take care of me then," she's responded stubbornly with crossed arms.

He crumpled before her eyes then, all the walls he had built up to keep the world out, came crashing down. "But I need it. Can't you see, I don't want you to get hurt, at all. And I don't want to lose you." He was on the verge of tears now, and couldn't bring himself to look her in the eyes.

Had he been brave enough to chance a glance in her direction, Hopper would have seen that he wasn't the only one in the car whose eyes were more than misting.

At that moment, an epic battle was wagging itself inside Ana



Thompson; a war between what she wanted and what she was comfortable with. In times like these, comfort always seemed to win out. It's far easier to push others away than to bare your soul with the off chance of being rejected.

"That's exactly why I have to stay, you idiot." And her choice was made.

Ana leaned over the seat so quickly that Hopper barely had time to react before her lips were upon his.

It was a desperate and messy kiss, but it was beautiful. They clung to one another like the lifelines they had become. His hands in her hair, pulling her even closer than should be possible and hers resting on his chest.

It was just the two of them then, finally accepting what they'd come to know in their hearts for a while now.

**I wasn't gonna do it, but then, I was like, I'm gonna do it.**



## 16. Chapter 16

Ana's hail mary in the car had been successful. Hopper had agreed to let her stay under the condition that she remained at her home unless he was with her. She'd agreed to this stipulation begrudgingly, and he'd left to inform Joyce Hopper that her son wasn't, in fact, dead like the whole town believed.

Ana had kept to her word...for the better part of twenty-four hours. But, with no call from Hopper, her true nature finally won out, and she'd grabbed her car keys.

She didn't know exactly where she was heading, maybe the police station, but it never took long for the strange to find her.

An absurdly long line of maintenance vehicles passed her on the road, heading in the opposite direction. Weird, she thought, before remembering that weird was never just weird in this town.

She'd speedily hooked a U-turn and arrived just in time to see one of the vans flip high into the air before land upside down, effectively blocking the other vehicles from passing it on the street.

On bikes, furiously riding towards her at the opposite end of the street, were three familiar boys and one unfamiliar girl. Ana's truck skidded to a stop ahead of them, and she leaned out her driver's window yelling: "Throw your bikes in the back and hop in!"

The children had swiftly done as they were told without question, happily accepting the aid their reading teacher was offering.

"I'm gonna need some answers, boys," she'd said while speeding away. "What's going on? Lucas, you're up."

"Bad men are chasing us," he's stuttered. "Why are they chasing you? Dustin, that ones for you."

"They want her," he admitted through heavy breathes. "And why do they want her, Mike?"

Mike hesitated too long for Ana's liking.



"Boys! I can't help if I don't understand," she'd barked with such authority that all four of the kids in the cab jumped.

"She's from Hawkins Lab, and she had powers," Mike finally fessed up. "Right," Ana nodded as if the sentence were entirely reasonable. "The last one is for you, honey, what's your name?"

"Eleven," she whispered meekly. "Are you the one Benny found the other night," Ana asked while chancing a glance at the girl in her rear-view mirror. A small nod was the confirmation she received.

"Okay then, Eleven. I've got a plan." Ana pressed the pedal to the floorboard, putting as much distance between them and the men in the vans as possible.

Ana drove the crew to the abandoned junkyard and parked her truck under some trees for coverage.

Dustin barely made it out of the vehicle before he started fangirling. "Holy shit. Did, did you see what she did to that van? I mean that that was awesome." After the words left his mouth, he looked at Ana bashfully.

"I'll allow it, but this is the only time y'all get to swear in front of me. What's the rule?" "We can't swear if you can't swear," came a chorus of replies from her students. "That's right."

Ana walked off to check the perimeter, allowing the kids to have their teenage angst moment in private.

The sound of helicopters approaching squashed all discussion. Ana ran back to the group at top speed and yelled, "we need to find a place to hide! The bus. Everyone in." They followed the order rapidly.

"Under the seats. Get down," came her followup. Everyone waited with bated breath as the sound got closer. "From this point forward, you do as I say, and exactly as I say. If I tell you to run, you run. If I tell you to hide, you hide. Got it?" They all nodded in understanding, fear present on their young faces.

They waited in silence, that's all the group could do now. If they left the safety of the bus, they'd be seen by the helicopter. If Ana left to



find help, the kids would be vulnerable. So, while she racked her mind for some better alternative, the children hoped for a miracle.

In some nerdy poetic justice, their miracle came from Mike's handheld radio.

"Mike, are you there? Mike? Mike, it's me, Nancy." It was the eldest Wheeler's voice calling to her brother through the channels.

The group scrambled to produce the sounding machine from inside a backpack. "Mike, are you there? Answer. Mike, we need you to answer."

"Is that your sister?" Lucas questioned, despite the obvious answer. "This is an emergency, Mike. Do you copy? Mike, do you copy?" The teenager continued, desperately to try and reach her younger sibling.

"Okay, this is really weird," Dustin voiced for everybody. Lucas went to grab the radio, "Don't answer," Ana and Mike said in unison.

"She said it was an emergency," Lucas defended. "What if it's a trick," Mike shot back. "It's your sister," Lucas argued.

"What if the bad people kidnapped her?" Solid argument, Mike, Ana thought. She ended up snatching the radio away from both of them while they continued to argue. "What if they're forcing her to say this?"

"I need you to answer," the radio sounded again. Finally, Dustin piped up, "It's like Lando Calrissian. Don't answer."

They did NOT have time for some Star Wars shit.

"We need to know that you're there, Mike," Nancy tried one final time before a new voice sounded through the speaker.

"Listen, kid; this is the chief. If you're there, pick up. We know you're in trouble and we know about the girl." Ana thanked all the stars in the sky that she now had possession of the walkie.

"Why is she with the chief," Lucas probed. "How the hell does he know about...," Dustin petered off, side-eyeing Eleven.



Hopper wasn't done with his call yet; "We can protect you, we can help you, but you gotta pick up. Are you there? Do you copy? Over."

Ana drew in a deep breath; Hopper was gonna be pissed. "Hey, it's Ana. We got ourselves a bit of a situation here, Hop. Over."

Surprisingly, knowing about Hopper's history of sneaking around with Chrissy Carpenter came in handy, and she was able to convey their location without spouting off the actual address.

Then, it was back to waiting. After some time, the kids began bickering back and forth until the sound of vehicles approaching silenced the bus. "Stay here and keep quiet," Ana had instructed before stepping outside with her gun brandished.

Shit, the two vehicles that approached definitely weren't Hopper and company. Maybe she'd be shooting someone by the end of the day after all. Three grown men and just one of her, not great odds, but she had enough bullets to manage it.

They hadn't seen her yet, which gave her the element of surprise. Hiding behind the back of the bus, she knocked the first guy to approach her out with a well-placed blow to the temple. That left only two.

It turns out; the remaining two wouldn't be a problem because Hopper had shown up in the nick of time and incapacitated them without much fanfare.

"Just couldn't stay at home, could you," he'd asked once they'd met up at the front of the bus. Ana shrugged her shoulders, noncommittally in return, before Hopper stepped onto the bus. "All right, let's go."

None of the kids moved, shocked by his appearance. "Let's go!" That got everyone moving.



## 17. Chapter 17

The reunion at Joyce Byers' house was one big hullabaloo, filled with hugs, apologies, and explanations.

During the flea and the acrobat parable, it occurred to Ana just how much of an interloper she was in this situation.

Everyone had something substantial at stake here, except her.

Joyce Byers was missing a son. Jonathan Byers was missing a brother. Mike Wheeler, Dustin Henderson, and Lucas Sinclair were missing their best friend, Will. Nancy Wheeler was also missing her best friend, Barb. Jim Hopper held the weight of the town's wellbeing on his shoulders.

And Ana, while she would do anything to help, her investment in the situation could never match theirs. She'd been an outside mere months before, and now, here she was intruding on their trauma.

Eleven had tried to contact Will and Barb through the radio. She had failed, and the shame was evident on her face.

"Come on," Ana said with a hand on the younger girl's shoulder. "Let's take a break." Ana ushered her to the bathroom where the girl could cry without a half dozen eyes watching her.

"Everyone knows you're trying your hardest," Ana reassured, taking a seat on the closed toilet lid. "Nobody blames you."

Eleven deftly nodded at Ana's words, while wiping away her tears in the bathroom sink.

"I know it must not be easy for you," Ana tried to continue her show of support before being interrupted.

"The bath," Eleven stated simply. "The bath," Ana questioned in return. "I can find them. In the bath," Eleven had answered.

The two left the bathroom and shared this theory with the other occupants of the house. For it to work though, they'd need to build a



sensory deprivation tank, but none of them could figure how.

Luckily, Ana knew the phone number of a particular nerdy science teacher who would definitely possess that information.

After some convincing, Dustin had extracted the necessary logistics out of Mr. Clarke, and now all the crew needed were the requisite supplies.

The Byers owned a kiddie pool that could act as a tank, but the last element they needed was the most important.

"Then we just need salt. Lots of it," Dustin had announced. "How much is lots?" Hopper had questioned, and an unreasonable 1,500 pounds was the answer he'd received.

"Well, where are we gonna get that much salt," Nancy had asked, baffled.

Finally, Ana could be of some use. "The school," she announced with a grin. "And guess who has an extra set of keys."

Everyone split up after parking outside of the gym. Jonathan and Hopper went to get the bags of salt. The Wheeler siblings took off in search of hoses to fill the bath with. Joyce took Eleven to make some blackout goggles.

And Ana, well, she got stuck with Dustin and Lucas unrolling the kiddie pool.

"Y'all, get it together. It's not that hard!" Ana couldn't help but yell in frustration; those two boys were being the exact opposite of helpful.

"Son of a bitch!" "Pull it back." "I am!" "Shit!" It was like working with Tweedledee and Tweedledum.

"If either of you lets go of your side one more time, it's not a monster you'll have to worry about," she'd warned menacingly, which finally got the two cooperating.

It took the crew awhile, but eventually, their homemade sensory deprivation tank was ready, and Eleven was hesitantly stepping



inside.

Everyone waited and watched, in both wonder and nervousness, as she proceeded to float.

Everything happened in fast forward after that.

The power in the gym went out. Eleven was saying that Barbara was gone. Nancy was crying. Joyce was trying to comfort the girl. Eleven was talking to Will in the void, and he was answering through the radio. Joyce was desperately trying to reach her son.

Then, as quickly as it had started, the connection broke, and Eleven was upright in the tub crying while Joyce held her.

Joyce, Hopper, Ana, and Jonathan now stood crowded around one another deliberating on their next move.

"So this fort. Where is it," Hopper asked Joyce, as it was were Eleven mentioned seeing Will last. "Uh, it's in the woods behind our house," she answered. "Yeah, he used to go there to hide," Jonathan added.

Hopper was putting on his coat and heading for the door now. The three quickly trailing behind him outside.

"Hey, get back inside," Hopper order after seeing the three of them in tow. "What're you insane?" Joyce demanded, reasonably so.

"Look, if something happens to me, I don't make it back-" This fucking speech again, Ana thought, and Joyce was clearly on the same wavelength.

"Yeah, but then I'll go. You stay. Are you kidding me? He's my son, Hop. My son. I'm going" Without further argument, Joyce had turned to her oldest son to share some parting words.

"You're definitely not coming," Hopper said, turning on Ana with a stern look. "I know," she replied gently. "I'll stay here and watch the kids."

A tense moment passed between them in which they could only stare at one another; willing the other person to understand things left



unsaid.

"Be smart," Ana pleaded. "Come back to me."

Her words hit him like a direct blow to the chest. Hopper wanted to make that promise, but he knew he couldn't. Nothing was certain where they were headed.

Gripping her hips, Hopper pulled Ana towards him and closed all distance between them. Moving his lips against hers softly, he tried to provide her with a physical comfort that his words were falling short of supplying.

The moment was all too brief before he was pulling away from her.

"Be safe," he muttered against her lips before extracting himself from her entirely and heading to his car, yelling at Joyce to hurry along behind him.

**Is anyone reading this story regularly? Or is it just CalvinHobbesGatsby and I on this journey together?**



## 18. Chapter 18

Goddammit!

Ana had left for all of five minutes to double check that the doors were locked, and the older two had escaped. Jonathan Byers' car was gone too, so she knew they weren't just off in another part of the building either.

These kids just had to make life difficult, didn't they? Is this the annoyance Hopper always felt when Ana herself was being contrary? The reading teacher tried not to deliberate on the comparison for too long.

Well, she hadn't lost the younger four yet, so at least there was that. Hopefully, Jonathan and Nancy could manage whatever they'd run off to do without adult supervision.

And that's all Ana had to go off right now, hope, because the crew had returned to the stalemate of waiting.

If only time were passing as uneventfully for Hopper and Joyce at Hawkins Laboratory.

The police chief was faced with two impossible choices while locked in the interrogation room. One, protect the girl and sacrifice Will Byers to whatever wasteland he was currently trapped in. Two, sacrifice the girl and earn the opportunity to rescue Will Byers from almost certain doom. The latter wasn't just about giving up Eleven though, sending agents to recover her also meant betraying Ana's location, and she could very well be caught in the crossfire.

Ultimately, Hopper had chosen the option with the most amount of variables. If you throw enough things up in the air, some of them have to come down landing upright, right? He willed that to be the case, hoping that Ana could take care of herself and the others like she had been so stubbornly professing for the last week.

Because he too, only had hope to go off right now.



Dustin and his damn pudding had actually given them a few minutes of leeway that'd they'd have otherwise missed.

Seeing the wave of government officers pour into the Hawkins Middle gymnasium had prompted Ana to grab each kid by the jacket collar and throw them one by one into the hallway before directing them to her classroom.

Maneuvering through the hallways as quickly and quietly as possible, Ana kept herself between the men who were pursuing them and the kids she was trying her damndest to protect. Unfortunately, her room was on the opposite end of the school, and they still had a lot of ground to cover.

They didn't make it; the quintet was cornered and surrounded in the hallway.

A middle-aged woman approached, she appeared to be the leader, clad in a khaki trench coat and wielding her gun at the group.

The second the unknown woman's firearm audibly clicked, Ana had reacted out of instinct and raised her own. Firing one shot, Ana hit the woman just left of center mass and watched her fall to the ground.

She'd never shot anyone before.

Best not to dwell on it, as Eleven was using her powers to debilitate the remaining agents who all began to bleed from the nose and ears before falling to the floor, seemingly dead.

The strain had been too much for the little girl though, and she also fell to the tile, overcome with sudden weakness; she was drained like a dead battery.

The boys wanted to inspect her, try and wake her and make sure Eleven was okay, but the group didn't have the luxury of time that would allow for such things. So, Ana had hiked the girl up into her arms and directed the children to pick up running to her classroom.

But, again, they didn't make it.



Dr. Martin Brenner, the cause of every strange thing that had befallen the town, the one responsible for every disappearance and untimely death, now blocked their way along with three armed men.

With the unconscious girl in her arms, Ana could no longer reach her gun to stop these men in their tracks. She'd have to resort to using words in order to deter them.

"Touch these kids, and I'll rip your dicks off!"

Elegant. Classy. Ana felt her message was conveyed appropriately. It seemed to spur something in her subordinates as well.

"You want her; you have to kill us first!" Mike had warned.

"That's right!" Dustin supported.

"Eat shit!" Lucas added.

Ana would have applauded their morale had her hands not been otherwise occupied, not that it mattered much since they were all immediately grabbed from behind.

Ana tried to hold onto the girl as long as she could, she really did. But, with one uniform at her back, and Brenner prying her fingers off the girl's clothing at her front, she'd quickly lost the battle of strength.

Now, all she could do was watch in disgust as the mad scientist cradled his would be science experiment on the floor in front of them.

"Eleven? Eleven, can you hear me? Eleven?" Brenner asked while gripping the girl's face in his hands.

"Papa?" Eleven questioned weakly, fading back into consciousness.

"Yes, yes, it's your papa," came Brenner's creepy reply.

The boys and Ana continued to fight against those attempting to restrain them. Each kicking, punching and screaming endlessly, anything to gain an advantage and get loose.



"Shh, shh, you're sick." Brenner had tried to convince Eleven when she became visibly confused and upset. "You're sick, but I'm going to make you better."

"You're sick, you fucking psycho!" Ana didn't garner any attention for that insult; the hallway was full of their shouts and threats at this point.

"I'm going to take you back home, where I can make you well again. Where we can make all of this better, so no one else gets hurt." At least one more person was going to get hurt tonight; Ana was going to make fucking sure of it, even if it was the last thing she did.

"Bad." Those were the first words that left Eleven's mouth, and they sparked optimism in the hearts of her company. "Bad."

She then reached for Mike to the best of her abilities, but Brenner wasn't allowing it.

All grappling in the hallway was brought to a grinding halt, though, when the electricity started flickering.

"Blood," Mike whispered beside them as an explanation.

Oh, shit! They needed to get out of there now!

With the other adults distracted by the monster presently bursting through the adjacent wall, Ana, Dustin, Lucas, and Mike broke free of the arms that were previously suppressing them.

As the shooting started, Ana, once again, brought the weakened girl into her arms and the group took off running.

Finally, they made it to the pseudo-safety of the familiar English classroom.

"No matter what happens, you four stay behind me!" Ana had ordered while placing Eleven on one of the tables at the back of the room.

If this was to be her last stand, then Ana was going to go down swinging. With her loaded gun trained at the door, she waited.



All too soon, the Demogorgon came smashing in, completely leveling the classroom door in its wake.

Ana pulled the trigger as rapidly as possible. Each shot ripping into the monster's body, but none deterring its advancement in the slightest.

The boys behind her were shouting, but she could only focus on what was in front of her, and the fact that her chamber was now empty.

Ana struggled to reload as swiftly as possible, fear making her movements clumsy and less efficient.

The beast was stalking towards them, screeching, flexing, soon it would be close enough to touch.

After what felt like an eternity of fumbling, the gun was finally reloaded, and she was back to shooting at the monster with minimal success.

With one final squeeze of the trigger, the monster catapulted across the room, pinned against the chalkboard where it stayed.

Neither she nor the boys could claim responsibility for this turn events, which became abundantly clear as Eleven strolled to the front of the room. Her reddening eyes were trained solely on the beast in front of her. Pinning it down with her stare.

"Eleven, stop!" Mike and Ana yelled in unison, reaching the same conclusion about the girl's intentions.

They'd been flung to the back of the room for their troubles, which was where they'd be compelled to stay as events unfolded before them.

The girl advanced on the monster with an unwavering determination. The effort it took to hold the Demogorgon at bay was producing a stream of blood from her nose and ears.

They all knew the next step was necessary, necessary to end all the suffering, but that didn't make it any less undesirable.



With one final look back at the group, Eleven muttered, "Goodbye, Mike."

Using all the force contained in her tiny body, Eleven destroyed the monster. Her and the beast, both disintegrating in a plume of ash.

The boys cried out for their friend, but she was gone.

In the ensuing silence, Dustin Henderson, Lucas Sinclair, and Mike Wheeler gravitated towards their teacher who held them close to her while they cried in agony for their shared loss.

That's the scene the paramedics and police came upon when arriving at the school. And Ana refused to let a single one of them go until their respective parents had come to claim them from her.

Everyone was at the hospital now, waiting for Will Byers to awaken. Everyone except Ana Thompson that is.

She'd opted to go home, to the silence of her own house, instead. She'd played her part in the night's events, but this, this was about family now. Something which she wasn't, to anyone.

Hopper had found her there after coming through the unlocked front door; who was worried about something breaking in when the worst had already come to pass?

"It's over?" She asked without looking at him. Instead, staring blankly at the drink in her hands.

"Seems that way," he huffed, taking a seat on the couch next to her.

Hopper pulled her into his side, which she nestled into willingly. "You know, they say relationships bred out of trauma never last."

He chuckled for the first time that night; "we'll see."

**Not really the end.**



## 19. Chapter 19

For 352 days, they were happy.

For 352 days, James 'Jim' Hopper and Ana Thompson constructed the best relationship two profoundly jaded people could.

For 352 days, they pretended that life could be normal again.

After the dust had settled over Hawkins, Indiana and the investigators had stopped coming around, Jim finally asked the school teacher on a proper first date to a fancy restaurant outside of town.

"I'm starting to think you don't know me at all," she'd remarked sarcastically with a roll of the eyes.

Hopper was confused, "is that a no?"

"It is if you think small portions of overpriced food are the way to my heart."

He'd cooked dinner for the two of them at her house instead, and over several bottles of wine, they eventually shared the hard truths of their pasts.

"Tell me about Sara," Ana had finally gotten the courage to ask further into the night.

She didn't want to press him, it was obviously a sensitive topic, a constant pain he'd bare for the rest of his life, but one she needed to understand if they were going to move forward.

With a deep sigh, he had divulged the tale of Sara's sickness. How the first symptoms had come out of seemingly nowhere while they played in the park. The endless hospital visits that followed, none appearing to provide any improvement nor answers as to what was stripping the life away from his daughter. And then, how all too quickly, the seven-year-old was gone.

"Diane and I, our marriage didn't last long after that," he'd concluded



with a voice that was choked by emotion.

"I'm sorry, Hop," was the only solace Ana could offer.

"It wasn't your fault, wasn't anyone's fault," he said, draining the glass in front of him before greedily refilling it.

Well, it seemed only fair that Ana should lay herself bare before him now.

"Before I came here, I dated this guy who lied and cheated," Ana started in on her own story of heartbreak.

"Have you ever been with a real crazy person, Hopper? Not someone who you say is crazy after the breakup because you're mad or their mad, but a legitimate sociopath?" The question was obviously rhetorical, and so he stayed silent, studying her.

"They lie with such accuracy that you can't help but believe them. Can turn anything around on you should you ever dare question them. Make you seem like the bad guy for ever doubting their honesty." It was a rant, Ana was on a rant, but not one that she was anywhere close to finishing.

"My ex never hit me because everyone who has ever met me knows I'd never stand for that. No, instead, he had me doubt myself. He made me blame myself, and he got me to hate myself. I thought I was stronger than that; I thought I was clever enough and hard enough never to become a victim." She too guzzled down the full glass before her and promptly refilled it.

"God, I was a fucking idiot. I forgave him for cheating on me, multiple times, and I took responsibility for driving him to it. At the end of the day, I really let him convince me that I was the crazy one, and he was a saint for putting up with me. It took far too long for me to break the spell I was under, and once those rose-colored glasses shattered, nothing was ever the same again." The liquid in her glass sloshed dangerously from the force with which she was using her hands to talk.

"So, I left as quickly as I could, I ran until I was far enough away that



the memories couldn't catch up, because I couldn't stand the perpetual reminds that those memories now tarnished everything and I was now tainted in a way that can never wash off." There it was, the real reason she'd been driven to Hawkins

"And I know it's not the same as losing a child. I'm not even trying to draw that comparison. But, I need you to understand, never lie to me. I can always handle the truth, no matter how horrible, but if I have to discover it for myself..." The implied threat lingered in the air between them.

Hopper couldn't make the promise she was silently begging for. Knew, that if it came down to protecting her or hiding the truth, he'd end up breaking her confidence without a second thought.

Instead, he opted to pull her out of her chair and towards him. He might not have the words with which to validate her, but he could convey her importance in his life with physical affection.

It was a scramble to remove one another's clothing as quickly as possible after that.

While their lips were locked in a struggle for dominance, their feet were carrying them blindly through the kitchen, living room, and finally, towards the stairs.

Frustrated with their lack of progress, Hopper reached down and hooked his hands behind Ana's knees and hoisted her up, so her legs could lock around his hips.

Then, he led the couple to her bedroom, promptly kicking the door closed behind them.

In the morning, Ana would laugh upon realizing that she'd put out on the first date. How cliché.

One day, closer towards Christmas, Ana stopped by the police station to visit Hopper. She was on break from school now, and Hawkins has once again become a sleepy town, so they both found themselves with more downtime than either of them knew what to do with.

They were sitting in his office, just shooting the shit, when Flo



intruded upon the two.

She handed some paperwork over to the chief before asking: "Have you invited your girlfriend to the Christmas party yet?"

The question lingered between the three for a moment.

"You want to come to our Christmas party?" He asked; he hadn't corrected Flo on the label.

"I think I can find the time," Ana replied with a smirk.

And that was it, no high school moment where he asked to be her boyfriend. Just an unspoken understanding that existed between the two.

After the second semester started up, things fell into a comfortable pattern between the two. Weekdays were hard because they were both busy, but they found the time when they could. Most nights Hopper didn't stay over, claiming they both needed to be up early, and always left before 8:00 PM.

Personally, Ana thought she slept better at night after he'd thoroughly worn her out, but she didn't argue, seeing the logic in his reasoning.

Once summer came, Ana again found herself with too much time on her hands and nothing to fill the hours with. She decided to take a second job, managing lifeguards at the local pool, to fill the hours. All those years of competitive swimming in her youth had to be useful somehow, right?

However, her part-time job wouldn't prove to be the most exciting part of that summer.

Ana's parents had come up from Texas to spend a week with their daughter, and she dreaded how a 'meet the parents' scenario with Hopper would play out.

Her anxiety was all for not, as it turned out. Ana's mother was smitten with Jim, calling him handsome the second she pulled her daughter aside to have a private moment.



Most shocking of all though was her father. The Thompson family patriarch was a notoriously grumpy man. It's not that he was mean, per se, he was just old. He liked what he liked and didn't tolerate much, but by some grace of God, Jim had won him over.

Honestly, it wasn't so much an act of God, as it was a shared history. Ana's father was a veteran of the Navy and Hopper, a veteran of the Army. A mutual respect existed between the two men that allowed conversation to flow smoothly.

For the most part, that is. Her father maintained composure for two full nights before turning into a stereotypical dad.

"You know, if you hurt her, I'll have to kill you," he'd announced one night at dinner. Well damn, Dad, way to make shit awkward, Ana thought.

The silence that followed was palpable.

"I have no intentions of doing so, sir," was Hopper's delayed response. Such a kiss ass, Ana mused.

"She'd probably kill me before you'd get the chance anyway." That got a laugh from the entire table. Ana's parents had long since come to accept the fiery nature of their oldest child.

"It's one of the reasons I love her," Hopper concluded.

Well, damn. There was that.

For 352 days, their lives were pleasant and simple.

But, on the 353rd day, that delusion would come crashing down around them because, as Robert Frost once wrote, nothing gold can stay.

**Season Two is about to pop off, yo.**



## 20. Chapter 20

The one year anniversary was coming up, and everyone was on edge, to say the least.

Will Byers was starting to see things again; Hopper has divulged to Ana one evening in October. She knew he'd been attending Will's appointments at Hawkins Laboratory alongside Joyce, feeling a sense of responsibility for the young boy.

And Ana could have chalked it up to that, could have justified his increasingly distant behavior on demons resurfacing, had it not been for the night of October 30th, 1984.

That evening, Ana couldn't fall asleep, not for the life of her. She tried reading, she tried drinking, she tried sitting in silence and letting the darkness envelop her. Nothing worked.

So, she'd decided to drive out to Hopper's place on the lake. Maybe his company could lull her into the peaceful sleep that was alluding her. Or so she thought.

Upon arrival, she noticed that the entire place was encased in darkness.

Letting herself in with the key he'd given her, she found the owner nowhere in sight. It was strange, but perhaps he'd been called into the office on some emergency, or, at least, that's what she tried to reason.

This justification fell flat as the night turned into day and Hopper never returned home.

The good excuses had run out, and all that was left was a certainty that Hopper was hiding something, and paranoia about what that something could be.

Ana Thompson always believed that to be human is to experience and learn. Well, Ana had definitely experienced this scenario before, and she had damn well learned from it, which is why she didn't



confront Hopper immediately and outright.

You can't accuse a bullshitter head-on; they'll just double down on their own bullshit to save themselves. No, you have to catch a liar in the act, leave no room for half-assed explanations, and the opportunity to concoct even bigger lies.

Hadn't she warned him about this shit not even a year ago? Too bad the lesson hadn't sunk in, apparently.

So, she'd devised a plan to catch the police chief in his web of lies. All you have to do is give someone enough rope, and they'll hang themselves.

It began with a strategically placed phone call to the precinct: "Hey, it's Halloween. How about after work, you come over and help me pass out candy." The flirty tone was there, an implication that she wasn't just inviting him over for a night of handing out sweets.

"I can't. We're going to be busy all night keeping these kids in check." Well, that was some premium bullshit, at worst a house would be egged tonight, and she knew it.

"Okay," Ana said, trying to suppress the doubtful tone edging into her voice. "Well, if something changes, let me know. I love you."

"Yeah," was his reply, and the line went dead. Hopper hadn't bothered to return the sentiment.

Now, there's one trick, just one, to catching someone in the act. It's so simple that it doesn't get the appreciation it truly deserves; follow them. Wherever they go, you go, except don't pursue too closely and definitely don't keep your headlights on.

That's just what Ana did on Halloween night; she followed Hopper's cruiser deep into the woods to a remote cabin. He'd never mentioned owning a cabin, that son of a bitch!

After watching him enter, she crept up to the house as quiet as a mouse. She even managed to avoid the trip wires because you don't date a cop for nearly a year without learning some tricks of the trade.



Standing in front of the wooden door, She had to steel herself, nothing good could lie on the other side.

And Ana Thompson had to ask herself, at that moment, was it worth it? Was knowing the truth worth sacrificing everything she wanted to believe? Was being right more important than being blissfully ignorant? More important than being happy?

The answer in her head was a resounding yes, and so she pushed open the door.

No one on the other side was ready, especially not Hopper, who sat on the worn out couch amongst a pile of candy.

"What are you doing here?" His shock was palpable, but Ana wasn't interested in answering his question.

A television played from behind the closed bedroom door.

"Who else is here?" Ana demanded, making her way further into the cabin.

Hopper was on his feet now, trying to stop her progression towards the bedroom door.

"No one." Bullshit! This place was lived in. There were two places set at the dining room table. This wasn't a place he visited alone.

The sudden commotion in the living room finally brought out the mysterious third party. Ana wasn't sure exactly what she had been expecting, but it damn well wasn't the girl who had been presumed dead for the better part of a year.

But, there Eleven was, not standing more than a few feet away from her in the doorway. Her hair was longer, that was the first thing Ana noted.

"Eleven?" She questioned in utter confusion. How? Why? And, more importantly, when?

The younger girl ran to her and wrapped her arms around Ana's waist. Probably just happy to see someone, anyone, from the outside



world.

The action caused Hopper to snap, and he swiftly ripped the two women away from each other before rounding on Ana. "You need to leave NOW!"

There wasn't a chance Ana was leaving, not after discovering what he'd been hiding in the cabin all this time.

"How long has she been here? How long have you known she was alive?" There was no way around it; Ana was screaming at this point. Had there been any neighbors within miles, they'd be calling the cops to report a domestic disturbance about now.

Hopper didn't answer, instead, turning a back on his girlfriend in a vain attempt to block her and her tangible anger out for a moment. At least long enough to think of his next step.

She wasn't giving him any respite, though, and her anger had fully taken control of the driver's seat.

With all the strength she could muster, Ana pushed Hopper's back, so much so that he stumbled into the adjacent wall. "You fucking asshole. You, you-"

Ana Thompson, who knew more about the English language than probably anyone in Indiana, couldn't find the words to quantify this betrayal. She floundered like a fish for any way to express her disgust and devastation, but none came to her.

If words were going to fail her, then at least she still had actions. Breathing heavily, Ana turned away from Hopper and grabbed Eleven's hand, pulling her along towards the front door. "We're leaving."

For a large guy, Hopper sure moved quickly because he was blocking the door before she could reach the handle.

"No, you're fucking not," he said, using his body as a barricade.

"You're not keeping her here like some prisoner!" God, did Ana want to punch him in the face, but she wasn't willing to drop Eleven's



hand.

"I'm keeping her safe," he tried to defend while yelling back.

"Safe from what? From me?" And that's when it hit her, why Ana was so furious. Hopper lying about Eleven, keeping her existence a secret, meant that Hopper hadn't trusted her. That somewhere in his mind, he saw her as a threat to the girl's safety.

That took some of the wind out of Ana's sails, but not much.

"What, did you think I'd turn her in? Sell the kid out or some shit?" Her volume was still loud, but her tone was less angry, more hurt than anything.

"You're not a parent; you wouldn't understand." That was it, the nail in the coffin.

Ever since Ana had reached her mid-twenties people had looked down on her for not having children. Like, somehow, being selective about procreating was an undesirable quality that she possessed. Hearing the same judgment now, coming for the person she thought she loved, was all too much.

She could see that there was no winning in this situation, no outcome where she'd be allowed to leave the cabin with Eleven alongside her. Ana would have to concede, for tonight, at least.

Dropping down to her knees, Ana pulled Eleven into the tightest hug imaginable, muttering, "I'll get you out of here soon," into her ear, only loud enough for the two of them to hear.

Once she was back on her feet, Ana turned towards Hopper who still stood firmly in the doorway.

"This isn't over, but this," she gestured between the two of them, "sure is." Then, she hazarded one last sympathetic glance back at Eleven before pushing past Hopper, out the door, and out into the cold night air.

**I giveth and I taketh away.**



## **21. Author's Note-Immediate Action Required**

**Alright, I absolutely despise author's notes, so I'll try to make this as brief as possible.**

**Chapter 20, yikes! That was a real dick move on my part; even I can admit that. Bringing Hopper and Ana together, just to immediately tear them apart, was definitely not cool.**

**However, it was necessary, nonetheless. I feel it would be disingenuous to have these two profoundly flawed characters suddenly living a life of sunshine and daisies. To be human is to stumble, but finding the strength to advance regardless. And that's what I'm attempting to cultivate, a story centered in reality, even if its sci-fi elements often make it unreal.**

**But, enough of me justifying the character's bad behavior.**

**My vision for season two isn't as clear as that of season one, especially with the uncertainty of season three looming. I know where the story is headed but haven't decided on the best route to get us there yet.**

**So, I've decided to open it up to some reader input.**

**Obviously, everyone splits up midway through season two. Jonathan and Nancy attempt to find justice for Barb, Hopper and Joyce try and piece together the new threat to Hawkins, Eleven journeys off on her own, and babysitter Steve and company face off against the demodogs.**

**The question I have now is: which group should Ana Thompson continue her voyage with?**

**Who do you, the reader, want to see our protagonist interact with the most? Who would benefit significantly from her perpetual brashness? Who would help her grow as a person?**

**Any and all feedback would be much appreciated! Thanks!**



## 22. Chapter 21

To say Ana Thompson wasn't in the mood come November 1st was an understatement. She had walked into school that next day, daring any staff member or student to trifle with her. Some people can't take a hint though, not even when it's smacking them in the face.

She was lecturing about idioms to her class, and the examples seemed unusually pointed.

"For example, adding insult to injury. It means making a bad situation worse. Giving someone the cold shoulder is another way of saying you're ignoring them. And the phrase, it's the last straw, is another way of implying you're done with the situation. Y'all in the back, am I boring you?"

It took Dustin, Lucas, Will, Mike, and Max a few moments to realize she was talking directly to them. The group had been too busy whispering and messing around with Dustin's backpack to bother paying attention to their teacher's lesson.

When Ana was told she would be moving up to 8th grade along with her previous year's students, she thought it would be a blessing, no starting over from scratch.

Now, as her eyes burned holes into their inattentive bodies, she thought that maybe their comfort level with her was actually a curse. And the new girl, Max, when had she even become a member of their crew?

The group muttered their apologies, but she wasn't having it. "All of you, see me after class." It wasn't a suggestion; it was an order.

So, once the bell rang and released the other students, the disruptive five begrudgingly made their way up to the front of the room where their agitated teacher was waiting behind her desk.

Poor Mike Wheeler, she thought as they approached. He still didn't know his seemingly absent girlfriend was closer than he realized. Now wasn't the time for that revelation though.



"What's the deal?" She asked simply, with arms crossed.

At once, they all tried to stutter out an excuse for their distracting behavior, but none were providing a valid reason.

"Enough," she said with a wave of the hand that effectively silenced their rambling. "The truth, out with it."

The whole group looked to Dustin for an answer; it was his discovery that got them into this situation.

"I found a pollywog," he announced like it explained everything. "You wanna see it?"

Not really, Ana thought. Instead, she let out an exasperated sigh and said, "alright."

Dustin pulled the Ghostbusters contraption she had seen him carry around on Halloween out of his backpack. He was practically shaking with nerdy excitement.

The creature he produced from its depths looked more like an overgrown slug to her than anything else.

"I named him d'Artagnan, Dart for short," Dustin announced proudly while lovingly cradling the thing in his hands.

"Three Musketeers, nice," Ana chuckled inspecting it further.

"Would you like to hold him?" The offer got her to back away quickly. "No, I don't mess with things that squirm."

"Do you know what he might be?" Max questioned, causing all five students to look towards their teacher in hopefulness.

"Sorry, guys. I teach English for a reason. That's a question you'll have to ask Mr. Clarke." They all looked disappointed by her answer.

"We're showing him today, after school," Lucas announced. That answer satisfied Ana.

"Solid plan. Now, off to class you go." She said, waving them out her



classroom door.

The harmonious sound of the final bell ringing at the end of the day meant that Ana could finally drop the act of pretending to care what happened around her.

She just needed to drop one form off in the front office, and she would be home free for the day.

Walking down the hallway, Ana fantasized about what to do with her evening. Maybe she could jailbreak Eleven, wasn't like Hopper would be home to stop her.

Probably wouldn't be that easy, she conceded, before bumping straight into a much smaller body. The force of their impact knocking the other person to the ground.

"Jesus, I'm sorry," Ana said, offering her hand to help the individual off the floor. It wasn't until her unfortunate victim was back on their feet that Ana got a good look at their face.

Well, I'll be damned. "Eleven?"

It took a moment for Ana's body to catch up to her mind, but once it finally did, she was pulling the younger girl into the closest empty classroom and out of sight.

"What're you doing here? Does Hopper know you're here? Has anyone seen you?" Her questions were coming fast and furious.

When Eleven did not attempt to answer, Ana exhaled slowly.

"You came to see Mike." It was more of a statement than an inquiry, but the girl nodded her head in confirmation nonetheless.

Ana had to debate with herself, then, on what to do next. Was it the safest idea? Probably not. Was it fair that Eleven had been restricted from seeing him before? Definitely not. What harm could it cause? Now, that was the question.

In the end, Ana figured the girl had already made it this far out of the cabin, what damage could a little more time away cause?



After Ana checked the hallway for any passersby, the two carefully ventured out in search of the Wheeler boy. Ana made a silent prayer that they wouldn't run into anyone of consequence during their search.

The boy in question had ultimately been located inside the gym, but he was not alone. Hesitating just outside the door, Ana and Eleven watched Max and Mike interact on the other side.

"It's probably best if we wait until he's by himself," Ana tried to reason, but her words were falling on deaf ears.

The only thing Eleven could see could focus on was the image of Mike with another girl. So, she'd knocked the redhead off her skateboard with her powers, in a fit of anger.

Then, seeing Mike help the other girl up off the ground, holding her hand in the process, had Eleven feeling another way entirely.

The girl had to have used her powers, that was the only explanation Ana could come up with because she was standing next to her one moment and gone the next.

This was some teenage drama level angst that Ana hadn't been prepared to participate in at the start of her day. She went off in search of the upset little fugitive anyway, checking classrooms, hallways and bathrooms. Knowing good and well she'd get blamed by Hopper should anything bad happen to his would-be prisoner.

Her hunt was cut short by the sound of Lucas Sinclair screaming. Will Byers was having an episode on the field.



## 23. Chapter 22

There was no hope for Friday being a normal day, not when the first thing Ana saw upon arriving at work was Dustin, Mike, Max, and Lucas rifling around in the school dumpster.

"Do I even want to know?" She asked, coming up behind the group and scaring the living daylights out of the children.

"I lost Dart," Dustin declared in anguish, almost too dramatically, if you asked Ana. His peers seemed less than disappointed with this turn of events.

"Okay...," she petered off, implying the need for their continued explanation.

Mike was the one to fess up finally. "We think Dart is from the Upside Down."

Well, shit.

"What's the Upside Down? Max questioned the group, looking at each of them wide-eyed.

Well, double shit.

While Ana was glad the kids were finally sharing things with her willingly, no more running around and whispering in secret. A part of her was annoyed that the universe couldn't show the common courtesy of imploding her life in sections, instead of all at once.

Wasn't it bad enough that she was trying to deal with a breakup and the burden of an unfortunate secret, without the Upside Down choosing to pop off again too? It was downright exhausting and decidedly unfair.

At least, that's what Ana was arguing internally while half listening to the boys talking through their latest predicament.

Ana had been on her way to lunch when Lucas, Mike, and Dustin had accosted her in the hallway. They must have shaken Max loose



earlier, after refusing to answer her repeated questions about the mysterious Upside Down they kept talking about.

After halting Ana's quest for food, the group said she was needed in the AV room for a party meeting, said she was their Rogue or something. Ana had no idea what that meant but had followed them anyway.

Could have married a rich oil guy in Texas, lived out life like the tv show Dallas. No, instead, she was role-playing Close Encounters of the Third Kind. What had she done to deserve this? Had she upset an old gypsy woman and was now cursed? Speaking of curses, did Indiana have witches? Maybe they were to blame for all her miss fortunes. No, witches were Massachusetts thing.

This was the rambling internal monologue of Ana Thompson. She could hear Mike going on about True Sight somewhere in her peripheral, but none of the information was being absorbed. Maybe she had finally lost it. Didn't talking to yourself make you crazy?

No, she finally settled, crazy peoples voices had answers, hers were utterly useless.

"What's the plan, then?" Ana asked, snapping back into reality.

"We acquire more knowledge," Mike insisted. "I'll go to Will's after school. See what's going on. You guys stay here and find Dart."

Great, she was delegated to slug duty.

"Dart? What's he gotta do with this?" Dustin's preoccupation with the slimy creature was starting to become concerning.

"Will heard him in the Upside Down. I don't know how yet, but he's gotta be connected to all this. He's gotta be. If we find Dart, maybe we can solve this thing. Maybe we can help Will." Mike's problem-solving skills, paired with his conviction, was what made him a good Paladin.

Lord, help her. Ana was starting to understand Dungeons and Dragons references against her will.



As it turns out, Ana was stood up on the slug hunting quest. Not a single one of those hooligans could be found at the end of the school day. She'd spent way too much of her Friday afternoon looking for the squirmy bugger solo, before giving up and heading home.

Sitting in the silence of her house alone that night had Ana wondering, why even bother? A year ago, she thought living in Hawkins would give her purpose, but now... Every day Ana was feeling more and more like a side character in her own story. She was always there, always trying, but it was clear no one actually needed her here. She was again interloping in someone else's more critical narrative.

So, she dusted off an oldie, but a goodie; drinking until you pass out for the night. Her plan had worked stupendously, but, now, being forcibly awoken by her telephone ringing, made her regret the night before.

Ana grumbled out a less than warmhearted, "hello," when she'd finally answered the incessantly ringing machine.

It was Joyce Byers on the other end, hastily telling her that Will saw something in his mind that told him Hopper was in danger and that he might be about to die.

It was an exceptionally jarring statement to hear first thing in the morning while nursing a raging hangover.

Without thinking, Ana told Joyce she'd be right there, before hanging up the phone, grabbing her car keys and heading out the door. She may consider Hopper to be the world's largest asshat at the moment, but that didn't necessarily mean she wanted him dead.

The Christmas lights that decorated the Byers' residence the year prior had been a look. Ana couldn't say that the vine drawings littering the walls now were much of an improvement. Supposedly, amongst all the scribbles of blue and brown, lay the key to Hopper's location, they just needed to unlock it.

Their code cracker came in the form of Bob Newby, otherwise known as Bob 'The Brain.' Somehow, in his astounding mind, the oldest male



figured that the drawings were a scaled-down model of Hawkins' roadways. He quickly went about measuring calculations given to him by Mike, Ana, Will, and Joyce regarding the distance of specific Hawkins landmarks.

Thank god Bob had shown up, Ana had barely passed the one math class she was required to take in college. They would have been royally screwed without Bob.

After what seemingly took ages, their genius finally figured the equations and guesstimated that Hopper's location had to be about a half mile southeast of Danford. With this newfound knowledge, the entire company jumped in Ana's truck and took off for the marked spot on the map.

Hopefully, they wouldn't be getting there too late.

It was dark now, as they drove the back country roads looking for any sign of Hopper. "There's nothing, There's nothing here," Mike repeated, searching out the car widow for any sign of the police chief.

"Are...Are we close?" Joyce asked with uncertainty; they could all feel that time was running out.

"We're in the vicinity," Bob tried to assure the car's occupants.

"What's that mean, vicinity?" Joyce was growing exasperated now.

"It means we're close. I don't know, It's not precise," Bob said defensively. "I told you, the scale ratio is not exactly one-to-one. We needed to take-" Bob never got to finish his thought.

"Turn right," Will yelled over the adults arguing. "I saw him. In my now-memories."

Ana didn't need to be told twice, and twisted her steering wheel in the instructed direction; everyone in the car was forcibly pushed to one side from the rapid change in course.

Screaming filled the car as it accelerated through a field, leveling a sign, and some hay bales in its wake. Thankfully, Ana slammed on



the breaks just in time to avoid rear ending Hopper's trooper.

Easy peasy.

Ana threw the car in park and jumped out of the vehicle, not waiting to see if the others were following behind her. Hopper was nowhere in sight, but there was a big ass hole dug into the field. Made sense to her, the vines were showing tunnels underground, looks like they'd have to go under with them.

She had already started whacking at the ground with a discarded shovel when Bob and Joyce joined her. They stood over the younger woman, watching as she stabbed at vines that appeared to be alive, screeching and squirming as she viciously hacked them away. Once an opening appeared in the soil, Ana finally turned towards the other adults.

"I'm going down, but one of you needs to stay here so that we can get back up," she directed.

"You're not doing this alone," Joyce insisted back.

"Come if you want, but Hopper is my problem." There it was, Ana's acknowledgment that even though she was furious with him, even though she had ended their relationship just days before, she still cared for the police chief, and always felt responsible for him.

Without any further discussion, Ana walked over to the hole she had made and dropped down into the awaiting darkness.

Landing on her feet like a cat, Ana observed her surroundings and was immediately reminded of Hawkins Lab the first night her and Hopper had broken in and found the portal. Those were simpler times.

Joyce fell down behind her and started calling Hopper's name; Bob followed not long after. Guess they would have to find an alternative way out of the maze because Will and Mike certainly weren't strong enough to lift four full-grown adults out of a hole.

The three stumbled through the tunnels, Ana leading the charge, until reaching a fork in the path. At the mouth of the left tunnel, Ana



found one of Hopper's broken cigarettes, so they knew the trio were heading in the right direction.

Behind her, Bob was questioning, and Joyce was yelling, but Ana proceeded on with unwavering focus. They would have to stumble upon the right path eventually.

When they encountered Hopper's flashlight and hat amongst the littered bones and vines on the filthy floor, her theory was proven correct.

"Oh! It's his arm!" Joyce shouted, and the three quickly crowded around the police chief entangled on the ground.

While Bob and Joyce made an effort to extract the constricting vines with their hands, Ana pulled out her knife and started cutting. Dating a cop really had made her better prepared for dire predicaments.

"It's choking him," Bob pointed out, so Ana directed her attention to that area. On the ground beside them, Joyce found Hopper's abandoned knife and quickly began assisting Ana in her efforts to set the entrapped man free.

Before long, they'd made enough progress to allow Hopper some independent movement, and he snatched the knife away from Joyce to finish cutting himself loose.

Hauling himself up onto his feet, he was immediately embraced by Joyce. "Oh, my God. Hopper, are you okay? Are you okay? Are you okay?"

The way Joyce cradled Hopper's face was far too intimate for Ana's liking, and something green inside her turned over.

Hopper didn't answer, but he did pant out a: "Hey, Bob." Bob returned the sentiment; "Hey, Jim."

No one said shit to Ana. Back to being a minor character, she thought with a roll of the eyes.

The vines were still squirming and screeching about on the floor around them and, of course, Joyce was loudly panicking.



It wasn't the time nor the place, but Ana was starting to think she didn't like Joyce Byers all that much. The older woman had a frantic and desperate energy, one that led to her always needing to be saved. It was the exact opposite of how Ana Thompson conducted herself. Ana was confident, self-sufficient, and did what needed to be done without fanfare, but what did that award her with at the end of the day? Being straight up ignored.

Men in hazmat suits showed up then and instructed them to clear the area. Bob and Joyce ran out first, followed by Hopper, and then a begrudging Ana.

Maybe she should just stay down here, Ana contemplated. The tunnel's aesthetics did match her mood perfectly.

They had only made it a few steps towards the exit before Hopper remembered his discarded hat and turned around to fetch it. His rapid change of direction resulted in a collision with Ana, who had been following closely behind. His hands caught her shoulders in an effort to keep her steady and on her feet, best not to end up on the vine-covered ground.

"Ana, you're here." Hopper seemed genuinely shocked by her appearance, and that genuinely annoyed Ana.

"Geez, thanks for noticing, she said. Disdain was dripping off every word. Ana went to push past him, wholly done with their little interaction, but the man in front of her hindered that action.

Hopper pulled her into the tightest hug imaginable, and though Ana's irritation told her to withdraw from the embrace, she couldn't help but find herself sinking into the comfort that his body offered.

Maybe Ana Thompson was needed by someone after all.

**I truly cherish all the reviews, favorites, and follows this story is getting. I'm an anxiety-riddled and neurotic person by nature, so any positive recognition keeps me grounded. Thank you all!**



## 24. Chapter 23

Ana didn't follow the rest of the crew to Hawkins Lab. Despite seeing Hopper and Will obviously in dire straits, Ana felt she had intruded in other people's problems enough for one day.

Instead, she had gone to the cabin; with Hopper indisposed, someone would have to check up on Eleven.

The home was bathed in darkness when she pulled up. Not a good sign, but she ventured inside regardless, almost expecting what she would find inside.

It turns out her assumptions were accurate; nothing was on the other side of the door: no short-haired human who was supposed to be hiding, nor any indication of where she had gone.

The day, the week, the month, hell, even the year, it had all become too much. Ana was tired, exhausted really, but the hits just kept on coming. Crumpling underneath the emotional weight of it all, Ana collapsed to the floor of the empty cabin and cried until there were no more tears left.

Once the sun rose, and Ana's pity party had reached its pathetic conclusion, she headed out in search of the absent Eleven. Ana knew she couldn't be with Mike because he was at Hawkins Lab with Will, Hopper, and Joyce. That left her with Dustin and Lucas as possible suspects for aiding and abetting.

Dustin's house was closest to the cabin, so she figured she would try her luck there first.

Pulling up to the Henderson residence, Ana saw Dustin already out in the drive, but he wasn't alone.

Ana didn't know much about Steve Harrington except that he was Nancy Wheeler's boyfriend, and that he too had been unwillingly dragged into the strange events of last year. That, and that the kid had a beautiful head of hair. If he and Dustin were working together this early in the morning, it could only mean that her day would once



again be disintegrating into madness.

Yesterday by The Beatles now seemed to be mocking her as it played through the car's speakers.

"Do I even want to know what the two of you are doing with buckets of raw meat and gasoline," Ana asked the suspicious looking pair.

They both jumped in unison and let out a startled, "Ms. Thompson?"

"Contain your excitement, boys," she said with crossed arms. "So, what're we doing?"

What they were doing was trying to lure Dart out of hiding. Dustin regaled her with his tale of finding Dart eating his cat, ew, and then locking the treacherous creature in his cellar. When none of the other party members would answer his emergency radio calls, Dustin had enlisted the help of Steve Harrington and his baseball bat with nails. The two boys had arrived back at Dustin's cellar to find no Dart, but proof he had molted again and a hole in the wall suggesting that the monster had dug his way out of their temporary holding cell.

It was a lot of absurd information to take in, but Ana felt she couldn't be shocked by much life had to offer at this point.

While the trio was preparing supplies for their journey, Dustin's radio had finally sounded with a call from Lucas. His sister had turned off his radio the day before, that sounded right on brand with what Ana had witnessed from Erica Sinclair. Dustin gave him a brief rundown of the Dart situation and told Lucas to meet the three of them at the old junkyard. Lucas seemed more than a little dumbfounded to hear that Harrington and his English teacher were who Dustin was keeping company with.

Once everything was ready, the trio headed off on their quest.

Walking along the railroad tracks, Ana and the two boys trekked to the designated meetup point, dropping bits of raw meat for bait as they went. Somehow the conversation had come around to why Dustin was keeping Dart in his house in the first place.

"All right, so let me get this straight. You kept something you knew



was probably dangerous in order to impress a girl who you just met?" The judgment was strong in Steve Harrington's tone.

"All right, that's grossly oversimplifying things," Dustin said in defense of his actions.

"I mean, why would a girl like some nasty slug anyway?" Ana decided that she was a fan of the high school senior; he asked some solid questions.

"An interdimensional slug? Because it's awesome," Dustin continued to argue.

"I saw it. It wasn't," Ana said, adding her two cents to the conversation.

"Well, even if she thought it was cool, which she didn't, I just think...I don't know. I just feel like you're trying too hard." Steve probably thought his statement was helpful, but it only caused to upset the other boy.

With a frustrated sigh, Dustin retorted: "Well, not everyone can have your perfect hair, all right?"

"It's not about the hair, man," Steve admitted. "The key with girls is just acting like you don't care."

"Even if you do?" Dustin questioned while appraising Steve.

"Yeah, exactly. It drives them nuts," he assured.

A howl of laughter from behind them stopped Dustin and Steve in their tracks. Turning around, they found Ana doubled over, hands on her knees, bucket abandoned beside her, nearly dying with laughter.

"Oh my God," she said while trying to catch her breath. "That's gotta be some of the dumbest advice I've heard in ages."

Steve looked offended, "what? It's true."

"It might be true for bimbos," Ana said, straightening herself back up and wiping the moisture away from her eyes, "but, Dustin isn't trying



to attract bimbos. Right, Dustin?"

"Right," Dustin confirmed with a nod of the head.

"Then you tell him how it goes," Steve challenged the adult.

"Yeah, what did the chief do to get you?" Dustin asked with such genuine curiosity. "You're, like, the coolest chick I know."

"Aw, thanks, bud," she said, giving him a pat on the head that brought a blush to the boy's cheeks.

"The key is confidence," she stated as they resumed walking. "Girls like a guy who knows who he is and what he wants."

Her assessment couldn't have been too terrible because Steve nodded in agreement.

"Then what?" Dustin questioned.

Apparently, it was Steve's turn to take back the reigns of this love seminar. "You just wait until, until you feel it."

"Feel what?" Dustin inquired, clearly confused by the ambiguous statement.

"It's like before it's gonna storm, you know? You can't see it, but you can feel it, like this, electricity, you know?" No, Steve, he definitely didn't know, as proven by Dustin's ensuing statement.

"Oh, like in the electromagnetic field with the clouds in the atmosphere-" This kid spent way too much time hanging out with Mr. Clarke.

Stopping his train of reasoning, Steve corrected, "no, no, no, no, no. Like a...Like a sexual electricity."

Why was Ana here, listening to this tomfoolery, again? Oh yeah, interdimensional slug.

Dustin responded with an "oh," as if he understood. He most certainly did not understand.



"You feel that and then you make your move." Steve seemed so confident and pleased with his answer that Ana almost didn't correct him. Almost.

"Or," Ana interjected. "You could just ask her how she feels. Tap the well at the source, as it were." The ensuing look she got from the two boys would have implied that she had gone and grown two heads. Evidently, the idea of candor was outlandish to the teenagers.

Their conversation continued as though her interruption had never occurred.

"So that's when you kiss her?" Dustin asked boldly.

"No, whoa, whoa. Slow down, Romeo," Steve dissuaded.

"Sorry," Dustin apologized, though he wasn't sure why.

"Sure, okay, some girls, yeah, they want you to be aggressive. You know, strong, hot and heavy, like a...I don't know, like a lion. But others, you gotta be slow, you gotta be stealthy, like a...like a ninja." Steve was mixing his similes, and the English teacher inside Ana cringed. Animal to assassin was a weak comparison, Harrington. Real weak.

"What type is Nancy?" Dustin continued to probe the confident older boy for answers.

"Nancy's different. She's different than the other girls." Well, this was awkward. Hadn't Nancy run off with the eldest Byers a few days ago?

"Yeah, she seems pretty special, I guess," Dustin agreed, not picking up on the subtle change of mood in the older boy.

"Yeah. Yeah, she is," Steve concurred, though a little lackluster.

"But this girl's special, too, you know. It's just, like, something about her," Dustin said, bringing the conversation back around to his own love life.

Now, Ana had seen over the last several days at school, how quickly Max had integrated herself into the little AV group, but she had also



noticed that Dustin wasn't the only party interested in the new girl. Someone was cruising towards hurt feels; there was no doubt about it.

Ana wasn't the only one who recognized the impending danger.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hey, hey, hey," Steve exclaimed and halted their walking. "You're not falling in love with this girl, are you?"

"Uh, no. No," Dustin said, but his voice lacked an absolute conviction.

"Okay, good. Don't," Steve said seriously and resumed their progression. "She's only gonna break your heart, and you're way too young for that shit."

"Amen, sister," Ana whispered behind them in concurrence.

Silence fell between them after, and a melancholy look overcame Dustin's features.

Steve broke the uncomfortable silence. "Fabergé. It's Fabergé Organics," he said while indicating towards his hair. "Use the shampoo and conditioner, and when your hair is damp...It's not wet, okay? When it's damp, you do four puffs of the Farrah Fawcett spray."

She was gonna laugh at his expense, there was no way around it for Ana, but she did appreciate what he had just done for Dustin. He fell on an embarrassment grenade to make the kid feel better, and she found that admirable.

To save face though, Steve warned: "You tell anyone I just told you that and your ass is grass. You're dead, Henderson. Do you understand?"

With the tension broken, the trio continued towards the junkyard and, thankfully, away from the topic of dating.



## 25. Chapter 24

The squad finally arrived at the junkyard not long before sundown.

Steve surveyed the area and muttered his approval, "oh, yeah. Yeah, this will do. This will do just fine. Good call, dude." Dustin looked thoroughly pleased with himself.

They were throwing out the last of the raw meat pieces when Lucas decided to make his appearance.

"I said medium-well!" He yelled while biking up, but he wasn't solo. The red hair trailing behind his companion warned Ana that they were bound to have an issue on their hands in the not too distant future.

"Who's that?" Steve questioned, though, from the look on Dustin's face, he should have been able to guess the answer.

Steve, Max, and Ana started prepping the battlefield, while Dustin and Lucas ducked behind one of the beat-up old cars to no doubt have a tiff over the new girl.

Meanwhile, said new girl was utterly confused by their teacher's presence. "Ms. Thompson, you know about all this?" Max questioned her elder.

Ana let out a chuckle at the question. "You didn't know? I'm totally hip and with it, Max. Bet you're gonna pay more attention in my class now, huh?" The girl appraised Ana strangely but didn't question her any further. Probably wasn't the answer the younger girl was looking for, but they didn't have the time for long, drawn-out explanations.

The measuring contest behind the car was taking too long for Steve's liking, so he went over and whacked a chair against the boys' hiding spot, making Dustin and Lucas jump at the racket. "Hey! Dickheads! How come the only ones helping me out here are Ms. Thompson and this random girl? We lose light in 40 minutes. Let's go. Let's go, I said."



Steve Harrington had the makings of a great public school teacher if only he could curb his desire to call the children dickheads.

"All right, asshole! God!" Dustin whined. "Okay! Stupid." Lucas spat. Yep, this is precisely what it was like being a public school teacher.

The fivesome busied themselves fortifying the school bus using spare pieces of metal, strategically pouring out the gasoline to ignite later, and soon their trap was laid. Everyone filed onto the bus to begin their waiting.

It was quiet, eerily so, and the only sound that punctuated the stillness was the lighter Steve kept flicking. Ana was two seconds away from taking it off of him if he didn't cut it out.

"So you really fought one of these things before?" Max's question was unwarranted, they had all seen it, so it was easy for them to believe. Not so easy for an outsider.

Steve nodded his head in answer, but Max continued to question him anyway. "And you're, like, totally, 100% sure it wasn't a bear?"

Dustin cut in angrily at this inquiry, "shit. Don't be an idiot. Okay? It wasn't a bear. Why would Ms. Thompson lie? Why are you even here if you don't believe us?"

Ana scolded him for his harsh words towards the girl, but he wasn't deterred. He was mad at the situation with Lucas and taking it out on Max. "Just go home."

Max was notably offended at being snapped at, and headed up the ladder, away from the angry boy. "Geesh. Someone's cranky. Past your bedtime."

Once Max was out of earshot, Steve smiled and said: "That's good. Just show her you don't care."

"I don't," Dustin assured flatly, which earned a wink from Steve. "Why are you winking, Steve? Stop." Ana kicked Steve's shoe and instructed him to knock it off.

Ana was checking over her revolver, good thing she always kept it at



the ready in her glove compartment, when the screeching started outside. Everyone kept their eyes peeled, scanning the perimeter for any signs of Dart. Lucas and his binoculars spotted him first. "I've got eyes! Ten o'clock! Ten o'clock!"

The company waited on bated breath for the monsters next move. When he didn't make one, everyone became anxious.

"He's not taking the bait. Why is he not taking the bait?" Steve commented on what they were all witnessing.

"Maybe he's not hungry?" Dustin surmised, but the answer couldn't be that simple.

"Maybe he's sick of cow," Steve concluded. Goddammit, Ana knew exactly where this was heading.

Steve walked off to grab his bat, and Ana stood up, readying her gun.

"Steve? Ms. Thompson? What are you doing?" Neither answered Dustin's query; it was apparent what they were doing.

Ana went to the door and prepared to open it, while Steve turned back to Dustin. "Just be ready," he warned before throwing his lighter to the younger boy.

The two elders of the group warily stepped out into the crisp night air; fog slithered around their feet like snakes. "No matter what, we stay back to back, and we cover each other. Clear?" Steve nodded in conformation to the teacher's directive. The bus door creaked closed behind them.

Steve whistled and called out in an effort to draw the creature towards them. This had to be one of the dumbest ideas Ana had on record. She briefly wondered if she would be fired should a student be eaten to death on her watch? Yeah, probably.

Dart was waiting, just waiting in front of the pair, and there's nothing more unsettling than being stared down by a mini Demogorgon. At least, they thought there was nothing more unsettling, Lucas was about to shatter that belief for the two humans acting as bait on the ground.



"Guys, watch out!" Lucas' scream pierced the night air.

"A little busy here!" Steve returned without so much as blinking, but Lucas continued to yell. "Three o'clock! Three o'clock!"

Whatever was at three o'clock would have to be Ana's problem because Steve was keeping his sights locked on Dart ahead.

Seeing what was at three o'clock only confirmed that they were positively fucked. Apparently, Dart was part of a brood.

In the distance, Dustin was yelling at the pair to abort, but it was far too late for that. They were surrounded, and now their only hope was being both quick and smart.

The first beast lunged at Steve, but he dodged it by rolling onto the hood of a nearby car. Ana did her best to follow, shooting at another as it came at them from behind. Thankfully, her shot landed, and the animal fell to the ground, unmoving. Well, at least these miniature versions were stopped by bullets whereas the Demogorgon hadn't been affected at all.

The duo made a break for the safety of the bus, where the children were screaming at them to run faster. Steve swung his bat to stave off the spawn as they made their exit, and Ana shot those that dared approach.

After what felt like an eternity of running, Ana and Steve both fell into the security of their makeshift sanctuary, but the danger wasn't past yet.

Steve held the door closed with his feet as the devils rammed their bodies against it to break in. He pulled a piece of steel siding and placed it in front of the entrance to stave them off further, but it was too flimsy to last.

Everyone was screaming. The bus was rocking from the impact of bodies hitting against it. This was the end of them all if they couldn't conjure up a miracle.

One of the beats broke through the door, and Ana pushed the three kids to the back of the bus while Steve attacked it with his bat. The



screeching was deafening.

Dustin tried calling for help on his radio, but there was no one to help them now. No salvation in sight from their dreadful circumstances.

Pounding sounded on the roof, and it made everyone pause, the emergency exit was still agape. As one of the creatures approached the opening, Max finally saw up close and personal what it was that had the group under attack.

She let out a blood-curdling scream. Bet she believed their story now.

Ana pushed the girl aside, intending to shoot the damned thing as it roared in her face, but suddenly, all movement stopped.

The monster looked off into the distance, before jumping off the bus and leaving them alone entirely. All its minions followed suit as well.

Hesitantly, the crew stepped outside to see if their adversaries had really gone, and it wasn't just a trick.

They found that they were once again alone in the junkyard.

"What happened?" Lucas asked baffled.

"I don't know," Max admitted.

"Steve and Ms. Thompson scared 'em off?" Dustin suggested, but that was less than believable.

"I highly doubt it," Ana whispered.

"No way. They're going somewhere," Steve surmised.



## 26. Chapter 25

They were back to walking the railroad tracks, except this time instead of three, there were five making the trek. The shuffling of feet was the only sound to be heard for a long time. Everyone was tired, everyone was on edge, but no one was getting a respite this evening.

Lucas broke the weary silence; "You're positive that was Dart?" The flicker of their flashlights provided brief moments of illumination to their dark surroundings.

Dustin huffed out a response, "yes. He had the same exact yellow pattern on his butt."

"He was tiny two days ago." Oh, Max. She still wasn't entirely aboard the crazy train yet. The rest of the group, Steve, Dustin, Lucas, and Ana, had long since secured their round trip tickets.

"Well, he's molted three times already," Dustin stated as though it were obvious.

"Malted?" Well, Steve Harrington's vocabulary was definitely lacking.

"Molted. Shed his skin to make room for growth like hornworms," Dustin delivered the lexicon lesson.

Max's interrogation continued onwards, "when's he gonna molt again?"

"It's gotta be soon. When he does, he'll be fully grown, or close to it. And so will his friends." Dustin's answer didn't inspire a lot of confidence. The group had barely been able to destroy one full-grown Demogorgon a year ago, and, actually, Eleven had been the one to defeat it finally. This time around, they had no Eleven, just a baseball bat with nails, a single gun, and a whole lot of attitude.

"Yeah, and he's gonna eat a lot more than just cats." Steve meant it as an offhand comment, but the older boy didn't know the altercation his insensitive joke would produce.

Lucas stepped around his friend and stopped him walking with a firm



hand on the shoulder. The entire company stopped as well to witness the squabble brewing between the party's Bard and Ranger. "Wait, a cat? Dart ate a cat?"

Dustin tried to lie his way out of it, but, as Ana had proclaimed to him what felt like eons ago, he was a dreadful liar. "No, what? No."

Maybe all that hair stopped air from getting into Steve's brain because any reasonable person would have known that his next comment was the opposite of helpful; "What are you talking about? He ate Mews."

Could someone's eyes get stuck in the back of their head from rolling them too far? Ana was about to find out. She knew exactly where this mess of a conversation was headed. Max, apparently, did not. "Mews? Who's Mews?"

"We really don't have time for this, y' all," Ana tried to intercede, but the train had already left the station. She shouldn't have even wasted the breath on her ignored statement.

"It's Dustin's cat," Steve continued as though he hadn't heard her. Well, damn, Steve. Had no one ever told him that snitches get stitches?

Dustin yelled at the older boy to silence his affinity for secret telling, but the damage was already done. Lucas rounded on his friend and pushed his shoulder; "I knew it! You kept him!"

He tried to deny the accusation, Dustin really did, but as Ana had already said, he was a godawful liar. Everyone saw right through his attempts at deception, and their expressions landed right on judgment.

Pathetically, Dustin finally admitted that: "He missed me. He wanted to come home." While the sentiment was lovely, it was reserved for an interdimensional slug, so...gross. "I didn't know he was a Demogorgon, okay?"

Kerfuffle, that was the word for the day. Ana was being subjected to witnessing a kerfuffle between two teenage boys. On the surface, this



kerfuffle was about a slimy monster from the Upside Down, but below the surface, this kerfuffle was about a girl that they both liked.

While the younger three exchanged verbal barbs back and forth, Steve and Ana shared a look as if to say, is this really our lives? Their self-reflection was cut short by the sound of screeching piercing the night air. Together, they stepped away from the group, flashlights in hand, to investigate to noise further. It was originating from over the hill, and it was steadily getting louder.

"Guys," Steve tried but was ignored over the discourse. "Guys!" Ana attempted, but with a yell this time, and it effectively silenced all dialogue. Everyone could hear the continued howling sounds now.

Steve took off over the ridge first, Ana not far behind, then, Dustin and Lucas followed a few short moments later. The only one who was not interested in pursuing the shrieking sound was Max, who yelled: "No, no, no. Hey, guys, why are you headed towards the sound? Hello? Hello? Shit." The others were gone, and Max was quickly falling behind. The new girl made the smart, but equally stupid, decision to follow along.

Their pursuit deposited the group into an open area overlooking the entire forest, and the city of Hawkins. They were too far off, and it was too dark, to identify anyone creature moving through the woods, but their calls could be heard bouncing through the open space.

Lucas was using his binoculars to get a better view of their surroundings when his eyes landed on a familiar building; "It's the lab. They were going back home."

Of course they were, everything had to link back to Hawkins fucking Laboratory.

Knowing that wherever the monsters are was where they were headed, the party took off running towards the lab as quickly as their legs could carry them.

Damn these kids for having youth on their side, Ana thought, while huffing and puffing from the exertion. Hopefully, her eleven-minute mile stamina wouldn't fail her now.



But, adrenaline is a hell of a thing in times of danger. That's the only reasoning Ana could attribute for how rapidly they covered ground because all too quickly, the group was arriving at the front gates.

Before they exited the shelter of the trees, a voice called out to the crew from the other side. "Hello? Who's there? Who's there?"

Well, Dustin, Steve, Max, Lucas, and Ana sure hadn't been expecting to come across Nancy and Jonathan in their journey. Similarly, Nancy and Jonathan hadn't been expecting to find their brothers' friends hanging out with Nancy's ex-boyfriend and the Hawkins Middle teacher. Shocked exclamations were shared all around.

"What're you doing here?" Multiple people asked in unison.

Nancy answered first, "We're looking for Mike and Will."

"They're not in there, are they?" Dustin questioned uncertainly.

"Oh, they're definitely in there." This declaration earned several flashlights pointed in Ana's face.

"How do you know that?" Jonathan questioned a little more calmly than the others.

"Will had another episode; he was seizing and screaming. The hazmat guys rushed him and Hopper in there last night, your mom and Bob went with them. Did y' all really not know that?" If crises were gonna keep happening in this town, then they needed a better way to communicate with each other. If only phones could travel, but that was a ridiculous idea.

"You've known that this whole time?" Dustin questioned his teacher aggressively, "and you didn't say anything?"

"Nobody asked," Ana justified with a shrug. That earned her a lot of exasperated groans.

A monster's screech from inside the building stopped their interrogation. They were definitely in the right place, but for all the wrong reasons. Everyone looked on in horror as lights flashed inside the building, and the howling grew louder.



Nancy broke away from the group, noticing what the others hadn't yet; "the power's back." The seven of them rushed to the security booth to see if the renewed electricity meant that the front gate could finally be unlocked. Jonathan incessantly hit the open button, but the steel barrier wouldn't budge.

Dustin insisted on trying his luck with the button, but for several moments, the outcome didn't change. Then, the gate slowly began rolling back. He let out a pleased, "hey! I got it!"

Nancy and Jonathan hopped in his car, racing off towards the building, and leaving the original five behind at the not unobstructed driveway.

Waiting for their return was making everyone antsy. There was much pacing taking place down on the pavement.

Tires squealing towards their location meant that they were returning, but it was two cars now, instead of one. Ana let out a heavy sigh of relief upon realizing that the rearmost vehicle was, in fact, Hopper's trooper. Said car, stopped short in front of the group and Hopper yelled, "let's go," through the passenger window.

They all jumped in without a second thought, but it was a tight squeeze. Max, Dustin, and Lucas occupied the back, while Ana found herself shoved in the front; the meat to a Steve and Hopper sandwich.



## 27. Chapter 26

The air inside the Byers' home was permeated with sorrow. Bob the Brain had sacrificed himself to ensure the others' safety, and his absence was profoundly felt. If only that's where their troubles ended.

Will's unconscious body lay on the couch where Jonathan whispered words of comfort to his ailing brother. Nancy, in turn, attempted to comfort him with a supportive hand on the shoulder. Steve saw this act of affection and was noticeably wounded by it.

Hopper was relaying details about the night's events at the laboratory over the phone, but from his frustrated tone, it wasn't going over well. Hard to explain a pack of demon dogs attacking a government building, Ana imagined.

That conversation concluded with Hopper aggressively slamming the phone back onto its receiver. Probably not a good sign, but Dustin questioned to be sure; "They didn't believe you, did they?"

Hopper huffed and answered, "we'll see." Sounded a lot like the word 'no' to everyone sitting around the kitchen table.

Mike found this response unacceptable because he snapped at the chief: "We'll see? We can't just sit here while those things are loose!"

"We stay here, and we wait for help." Ana audibly tsked at the chief's order from her spot by the sink. That earned her a tight-lipped glare from Hopper before he walked off, down a back hall.

When was the last time Ana and Hopper had engaged in an argument? A few days ago, at least? Yeah, they were definitely due for a re-up.

She stalked behind him down the dark hallway and pulled him to a stop just before he could enter the room where Joyce Byers sat, mourning.

"Hey, we both know help isn't coming." Ana considered that whispering the contradictory statement might take some of the edge



off the words. Her hypothesis was immediately proven wrong; Hopper didn't like that. He leered over her, face to face, and whispered his disagreement. At least he was whispering; she hadn't been wrong about that smart move. "I said, we stay here, and we wait for help."

It was a bold next move, but now was the time for bold moves. Ana reached forward and grabbed the outside of Hopper's jacket pockets, one in each of her hands. He wasn't going to escape this exchange easily, not while she was latched onto him. Maybe the proximity would even soften the blow of her ensuing suggestion.

"I think it's time we bring out the big guns."

Her recommendation hung in the air between them like a foul scent; both parties knew she wasn't referring to literal firearms. It turns out; Ana was going zero for two this evening on hypotheses because proximity didn't do a damn thing to deter him from lashing out at her implied proposition.

With a chastising finger in her face, Hopper ground out: "We're not bringing her into this. We've already lost enough people today."

"Jim," she started, tightening the hold she had on the material between her fingers, "we'll lose even more without her."

He wasn't interested in hearing it, and even less interested in being in her traitorous presence. Individually prying each of her fingers away from his coat, Hopper entered Joyce Byers' bedroom and snapped the door shut behind him. Ana was left alone in the darkness of the hall.

She wanted to be sympathetic, understanding, Ana really did. The logical voice in her head acknowledged that none of what was going on between her and Hopper was Joyce's fault. Reasoned that the older woman had just lost her own significant other, and was obviously dealing with the trauma of witnessing his death happen in front of her eyes.

But, there was a louder, more cynical voice in her head that thought: 'Well, she's single now, Hopper. Here's your chance.'



Unfortunately, that was the voice that currently had both hands on the wheel.

Resentfully, she accepted that Hopper was entitled to be an idiot all he wanted, but Ana was smart enough to know that to reach the end, you have to go back to the beginning. They couldn't win this fight without Eleven, didn't have a shot in hell without the girl.

Silently, away from any watchful eyes, Ana slipped out of the Byers' house and into the awaiting night.

She started at the cabin, she hadn't expected the girl to make a miraculous appearance, but it was a start nonetheless. Ana knew she could piece together the girl's location if she tried, she hadn't done all that researching in college for nothing.

The overturned cardboard box and its contents strewn about had escaped her notice the last time she had visited, but it provided a clue now. All the documents were regarding Hawkins Lab and Eleven's imprisonment.

A specific stack of papers caught her attention because Ana had seen them before. They were reports on Terry Ives and the claims that her daughter Jane had been stolen from her. If Eleven has figured out who her birth mother was, one could only assume she would try to visit her.

Finding the number to Terry's sister, Becky, amongst the paperwork, Ana placed a phone call.

The line finally picked up after the fourth ring. "Hello?" Questioned the voice on the other end.

"Is this Becky Ives?" Ana inquires with as even a voice as she could muster.

"Yes, who is this?" The person on the other end asked in return.

"My name is Ana Thompson; I'm friends with Chief Hopper and Joyce Byers. I was calling to-" Ana didn't get to finish her explanation.

Becky had clearly been waiting for a phone call like this one. "Oh



thank God, I called the police station forever ago, but no one has gotten back to me."

"You called the police station?" Ana probed, needing a further explanation.

Becky seemed more than willing to provide her with the missing details. "A little girl who said she was Jane showed up to the house. She did this thing, where she talked to Terry using her mind."

"Is she still there?" Ana interrupted the other woman's story.

"No, no. She took some money out of my wallet and left some time ago." Of course, it couldn't be that easy.

"Okay," Ana continued, "what happened before she left? I need to find her as soon as possible."

Becky sighed on the other end, "we were looking through some of Terry's old files and the girl, Jane, she said she found another child like her. Another one with powers."

It wasn't much, but it was enough to go off of. Ana shouted her thanks through the line before rudely hanging up on the other woman.

If Eleven had stolen money from her aunt, then it meant she intended to travel, and traveling meant the bus station.

Ana drove her truck at an unsafe speed to the bus depot, but having left the police chief back at the Byers'; she figured the odds of her being pulled over were slim to none.

The woman behind the ticket window was an indifferent middle-aged woman who could barely be bothered to grunt out a greeting. Ana smacked her palm against the glass divider loudly, and that seemed to rattle the other woman out of her stupor.

"I'm looking for a little girl, thirteen years old with short curly brown hair. She'd be wearing an oversized flannel. Would have come through here in the last day or two. Have you seen her?"



The ticket clerk's momentary shock wore off quickly and faded back into apparent detachment in the blink of an eye. "I don't know, ma'am. Now, if you'd step aside, so I can help these paying customers."

Ana was likely to catch an assault charge if she didn't put a cap on the anger currently bubbling up inside of her. Instead, she tried a different tact that would hopefully be more successful.

Ana started vociferously sobbing into her hands. Everyone in the vicinity stopped to witness her outburst, and several well-meaning bystanders approached her to see what was wrong.

"My daughter is missing," a pointed whine escaped her throat, "and these people won't help me!" Maybe Ana should have given acting a try, rather than becoming a school teacher.

Her comments had sparked outrage from the crowd, and soon, the manager was coming out of his office to investigate the commotion. After Ana explained the situation, purposely leaving out key details, suddenly, everyone was willing to help her in the search for Eleven.

Ana was promptly escorted back to the surveillance monitors and given access to the footage in hopes of spotting her 'daughter' on the tapes. There she was, the video monitors showed Eleven entering a bus headed for Chicago, Illinois the night of Saturday, November 3rd.

Rounding on the manager, Ana frantically asked: "When did the last bus from Chicago come in?"

The man fumbled around with the bus schedule for longer than Ana felt was necessary before locating the requested information. "Five minutes ago," was his surprising answer.

Numerous people were haphazardly shoved out of her way as Ana rushed out of the security room and made her way to the bus drop-off. If she'd come this far to miss the girl by only a few minutes, she was going to fucking murder, someone.

But, if there's one thing you can always rely on public transport to be, it's late.



Ana stopped short in front of a bus that was just pulling up. She held her breath while the doors slowly creaked open, and the vehicle's occupants started to exit.

Nearly half of the riders had departed before she laid eyes on her. While there was no mistaking that this was her Eleven, the new look was just that, a look.

When the two women locked eyes, Ana let out a laugh of relief. Finally, something was going according to plan.



## 28. Chapter 27

The women embraced in the parking lot like two people who had been separated for years, and not just a few days. Eleven buried her face in Ana's stomach, and Ana held Eleven tightly, as though she would disappear should her hold loosen. She dropped a kiss to the younger girl's head in a show of affection, Eleven had been missed, and her absence had been felt.

The sound of clapping broke the two out of their moment. The crowd was pleased to see mother and daughter reunited after witnessing the stress the older woman had experienced. While it had been a means to an end, the attention was causing more of a problem now than anything, so Ana rushed the two back to her truck.

On the ride back to Will Byers' house, Eleven filled Ana in on her time away. She had met her birth mother, but the woman was virtually lost to the world, trapped in a loop of her memories. After finding out about another child with powers, Eleven had traveled to Chicago and met up with a girl named Kali who could make people see what she wanted using her mind. Kali had been troubled though, and her life was one of crime, which Eleven wasn't built for, so she returned to Hawkins to help her friends with the threat now plaguing the city.

It wasn't fair that someone so young should have to deal with so much, but the world wasn't done asking too much of Eleven, which became apparent upon their arrival at the house.

Pulling up the drive, Ana's headlights illuminated a group of demodogs descending upon the house.

"Eleven, you got this?" Ana asked, keeping the wheel steady in their approach.

Eleven's nose began to bleed as she made quick work of disabling the monsters trying to descend upon their friends within the home. She even knocked on through the front window for good measure.

Parking the vehicle, Ana let the girl reach the front door first. No one



inside the house was prepared for what was on the other side. And, by God, was a shit storm bound to follow.

Eleven unlocked the latches securing the entrance with her powers, then, pushed the door opened slowly before hesitantly stepping inside.

Everyone was crowded in the living room. Nancy and Hopper had rifles at the ready, Steve was wielding his modified baseball bat, Lucas held tension on his wrist rocket, Mike was holding...a candle base of some kind, and the rest stood apprehensively behind.

All weapons were lowered upon Eleven's emergence, but bewildered expressions were abound. The only person who didn't appear shocked was Mike, no, his appearance was one of jubilation.

Mike and Eleven ran forward and held each other as tears fell from both of their eyes. Eventually, though, the conversation turned towards her year-long absence, and that's where landmines lay.

"Why didn't you tell me you were there? That you were okay?" Mike questioned.

Ana knew the answer, but she wasn't going to be the one to fess up. No, that responsibility fell to Hopper. "Because I wouldn't let her," the older male admitted.

Betrayal, the look Hooper received from Mike Wheeler at that moment could only be described as one of betrayal.

While Hopper inquired as to where Eleven had been all this time, and hugged the girl, a fury was building inside the Wheeler boy. "You've been hiding her," he surmised while looking at Hopper. "You've both been hiding her this whole time!" Mike's accusation now included Ana, should his glare in her direction be anything to go off of.

If Ana hadn't been a female, and his English teacher, she probably would have received the push, and not Hopper, because she was closer to Mike at the time. However, the lesson of 'never hit a girl' must have stuck in the boy's mind, as Hopper took the blow instead.

After recovering from the brief stumble, Hopper grabbed Mike by the



front of his shirt, and instructed: "Hey! Let's talk. The three of us. Alone." The agitated men stomped off to the nearest bedroom, and Ana trudged along behind them.

The door hadn't even closed behind them before Mike started throwing around accusations. "Protecting her! Protecting her?"

The two adults had their work cut out for them defusing this particular bomb. "Listen. Listen to me," Hopper started. "The more people know about her, the more danger she's in. And the more danger you and your family are in"

Ana had been on the receiving end of this justification once before, and she knew that it went down about as well as the Hindenburg, so she wasn't the least bit shocked by Mike's interruption. "So I should be thanking you?"

"I'm not asking you to thank me! I'm asking you to try to understand." Was Hopper's speech really just for Mike's benefit? Why had Ana even been brought along when she, presently, wasn't adding shit to the argument?

Mike was yelling and throwing his arms about now, "I don't! I don't understand!"

Hopper tried to brush his rage off with the wave of a hand. "That's fine. That's fine! Just do not blame her!" Then, he turned and pointed in Ana's direction, "or her. They're upset enough as it is."

Hey now, Ana didn't need anyone making excuses for her, and she made it known. "No, no, no," she said, pushing her way between the two. "Mike, I've known for days, and I could have told you at any point, but I didn't. I'm as much to blame."

Well, that did the exact opposite of diminishing the boy's anger. "I do! I blame you! I blame both of you!" Mike's accusatory finger was dangerously close to sticking Ana in the eye as he waved it around haphazardly.

"Fair enough," Ana conceded. While Hopper humorlessly laughed: "That's okay, kid. That's okay."



The Wheeler boy's resentment was just gearing up though. "No! Nothing about this is okay!" He was back to throwing hits that, due to the fragility of her gender, Ana was excluded from receiving. She attempted to insert herself between them again, but Hopper threw his forearm out and caught her in the chest, pushing her out of the way and back into the bedroom wall.

"You're a stupid, disgusting," each insult was punctuated with a strike, "lying piece of shit! Liar! Liar! Liar!"

After letting the kid work out some of his aggression, Hopper finally put a stop to the violence. "Okay. All right! Stop it. Stop it. It's okay. Stop it! Stop it!" He hugged Mike to his chest, and the boy, now thoroughly exhausted, collapsed into his waiting arms and sobbed.

"You're okay, kid. You're okay. I'm sorry, kid," Hopper reassured the melancholy boy while cradling Mike's head below his chin. Had the circumstances been different, had the situation not been so dire, Ana would have cracked a joke about her ovaries exploding.

The entire extended gang was all accounted for as a crowd gathered around the small kitchen table. The discussion turned towards the now super massive portal that the Mind Flayer had slipped through, and Eleven assured she was strong enough to close it despite Hopper's repeated objections. Mike identified a more pressing problem though, if the Mind Flayer and his army were connected, and cutting off the head meant destroying the body, then Will Byers would be a casualty of obliterating the gate.

They settled on a plan to extract the Mind Flayer from Will Byers' body; they were going to burn the virus out of its host.

Everyone rushed to prepare for the oncoming storm and ready the necessary supplies. Ana followed along outside, while Hopper carried Will's still unconscious body to Jonathan's car, providing directions to the cabin.

"I'll get them there safe," Ana announced reaching the driver side door, beginning to open it with the intention of chauffeuring the Byers family to the unknown location.



Hopper's hand reached out and slammed it back closed under her hands. "No, you're not going with them."

What was he playing at? Ana released the door handle anyway and turned towards him fully.

"Okay," she started, unsurely. "Then I'll hang back with Steve and the others."

"You're not staying with them either," came Hopper's assertion.

Oh, bullshit was she being benched in the final inning, and she let her distaste for the idea be known. "There's no way in hell I'm going home, Jim," she bit out with crossed arms.

He took a half step towards her and faltered for a moment. "You're coming with the kid and me." He said it so quietly that she was almost certain she had misheard him.

He loved to exclude her from the heavy shit, what had changed? This turn of events was unexpected, and it left her standing outside gaping like a fish, while Hopper headed back inside to collect Eleven.

Shortly after, Mike and Eleven were having their cliché goodbye moment in front of the house while Ana situated herself in the backseat of Hopper's SUV. Their moment was interrupted by Hopper, however. "El, come on, let's go. It's time."

Ana scolded him once he was in the driver's seat. "You should have let them kiss." The older man looked horrified by her suggestion.

"What about my kiss then?" Hopper held a small smirk on his face as he jokingly questioned.

"You planning on going somewhere?" Ana shot back, adjusting her position to the center of the car's rear.

"No, I'm not," he answered with a chuckle.

"Good, then you ain't getting one," Ana replied sarcastically.



## 29. Chapter 28

The ride back to the lab was peaceful and quiet for a while, but the silence didn't last all that long.

The three were gazing out their respective windows in contemplation when Hopper's voice broke the daze. "So, what, we're just not gonna talk about it, huh?

His inflection was pointed, and it immediately put Eleven on edge. "About what?" She replied with sass.

"Oh, I don't know. I'm just curious, you know, why all of a sudden you look like some kind of MTV punk." God, he could use some lessons in etiquette. Ana whacked him on the shoulder and told him to watch his tone as Eleven rolled her eyes in the passenger seat.

When she didn't answer his judgmental question, Hopper took Ana's suggestion under advisement and tried a different approach. "I'm not mad, kid. I just want to know where you've been. That's all."

"To see Mama," Eleven finally admitted.

Hopper looked visibly taken aback by the unexpected information; he hesitated for a moment. "Okay. How'd you get there? Did you take her there?" The latter question was directed towards Ana as Hopper caught her eye in the rearview mirror. She offered him a curt shake of the head in answer, so he returned his sights to the girl in the passenger seat.

"A truck. A big truck," Eleven answered simply. Hopper understood the words individually, but put together in this context; they had him mystified.

He was using his police interrogation voice now, and that never spelled out a good time any for the parties involved. "A big truck? Whose truck was it?"

"A man's."

"A man's?" This back and forth really wasn't getting them anywhere



fast.

"A nice man," Eleven concluded. The double take this answer caused Hopper to give was beyond adorable. Ana always thought that bewildered was a good look on the police chief.

Hopper was really making an effort to keep his vice level now. "Okay. So let me just get this straight in my head. So a nice man in a big truck, he drove you to your mama's, and then what? Your Aunt Becky gave you those clothes and that makeup?"

Eleven stumbled over her answer at first, but settled on: "I shouldn't have left."

The driver's face softened, and he let out a heavy breath at her admission. "No. No, this isn't on you, kid. I should have been there. One of us should have been there. I should never have lied to you about your mom. Or about when you could leave. I should never have lied to Ana about hiding you. A lot of things I shouldn't have done. Sometimes I feel like I'm...Like I'm just some kind of black hole or something."

Hopper stopped for a moment to inhale deeply; he was close to tears, hell, every eye in the vehicle was misting over. No one in the car was faultless, they had each been underhanded with the other, they hadn't been fair to one another, and they hadn't been kind.

Eleven's voice cut through the loaded silence. "A black hole?"

"Yeah, it's a...You know, it's a thing in outer space. It's like, it sucks everything towards it and destroys it. Sara had a picture book about outer space. She loved it."

It had been so long since they had talked about his late daughter, but Ana wasn't surprised that he brought her up now. The idea of losing Eleven always reminded him of what he had already lost.

"Who's Sara?" Now, that did surprise Ana. It hadn't occurred to her that Hopper wouldn't have mentioned her to Eleven at some point over the last year they had spent together.

Hopper almost seemed surprised too, realizing that Eleven didn't



know about his daughter. "Sara? Sara's my girl. She's my little girl."

"Where is she?" Eleven inquired with tears still streaking down her young face.

"Well, that's kind of the thing, kid. She, uh...She left us. The black hole. It got her." Why did Ana repeatedly find herself intruding in on this conversation? Was it purely coincidental, or was Hopper trying to make her understand as well?

He continued illuminating the two on the rationale behind his actions. "And somehow...I've just been scared, you know? I've just been scared that it would take you, too. I think that's why I get so mad. I'm so sorry. For everything. I could be so...so..."

Ana offered a gentle hand on his shoulder as a show of solace; Eleven offered up the answer: "Stupid?"

This brought a chortle to the man's lips. "Yeah. Stupid. Just really stupid."

Eleven reached over the front seat and connected their two hands. It was a touching moment and one that should be entirely their own. So, Ana went to withdraw her hand from Hopper's shoulder to sink back into the rear seat, but she was stopped in her retreat.

"Stay," Eleven commanded, catching Ana's fleeing hand within her free one. There they were, just the three of them, sitting in the quiet of the cab with interlocked fingers and interconnected affections.

All too quickly, the trio was parking in front of the damn Hawkins Laboratory. They filed out, and Ana met Hopper at the trunk to receive his ancillary rifle, which she shouldered hastily.

The two met Eleven at the front of the vehicle where she was gazing upon the building wearily, no doubt flashing back to her time spent as a prison in the place.

"All right. You let me do the heavy lifting up front. You save your strength till we're below. Try and stay as close to Ana as possible, all right?" They both nodded deftly at his instructions.



When he asked if she were okay, Eleven stomped off in the direction of the building defiantly. Well, I guess they had their answer. Hopper and Ana had to jog behind to catch up with the girl's confident steps.

The scent of death hung the air of Hawkins Lab. Bodies of the deceased workers still lay where they had fallen on the floor; it was a gruesome sight. The alarms echoed continuously as the lights overhead flickered. Thankfully though, they didn't encounter any demo-dogs as they made their way through the halls, Hopper leading, Eleven in the middle, and Ana covering the back.

Their first surprise came in a stairwell, in the form of Dr. Owens, who was slumped on the ground, barely clinging to life. Hopper knelt next to the older man and inspected his badly mangled leg. "Those suckers got you pretty good, huh?"

The doctor tried to say something, but Hopper halted his attempts. "It's okay, don't talk. Don't talk. I got you. I got you." He took off his belt to create a makeshift tourniquet, trying to stem the bleeding.

As Hopper worked, Owens finally noted the two companions standing behind him. Ana wasn't much to note, but the younger girl was unexpected.

"Oh yeah, I've been meaning to tell you," Hopper started, nonchalantly. "This is Eleven. Eleven, Doc Owens. Doc Owens, Eleven. She's been staying with me for about a year, and she's about to save our asses. Maybe when this is all said and done, maybe you could help her out, too, you know? Maybe you could help her lead, like, a normal life. One where she's not poked and prodded and treated like some kind of lab rat, you know? I don't know; it's just a thought."

A harsh tug on the belt securing his wound should have told the doctor that it wasn't just a thought nor a suggestion coming from Hopper. "But, uh...think about it."

As Hopper moved away from the man, Ana moved in. "He means that's definitely what you're going to do once this is all done," she whispered as she wrapped an arm around Owens' lower back. "Alright, up we go, Doc," and she hoisted them both to their feet.



It wasn't easy dragging the injured man along, but as far as Ana could figure, three somewhat non-disabled adults were better than two.

The hallway they traveled along now was all too familiar for those in the party, and they knew they were getting close when the distant sound of demo-dogs screeching could be heard.

Hopper forged ahead alone, only to discover that the room they needed to be in, was crawling with the monsters. He intended to go in, guns a-blazing, but something changed. Before he could get a shot off, all the monsters turned tail and ran back into the tunnel systems below.

Their pathway was now clear for Eleven to do her thing. Jonathan even called through the radio, giving them the go ahead.

Ana would have to stay behind with Dr. Owens in the control room; they would operate the lever that lowered Eleven and Hopper down into the portal. She didn't like it, them going on without her, but she knew it was what needed to be done.

There wasn't much time left before the creatures returned, but Ana found enough time for some final words. She squatted in front of Eleven and encased the girl's face in her hands. "You're stronger than all of us. You can do this. Easy peasy." The two shared a small smile before Ana kissed her atop the head and stood.

When she was fully upright, and facing Hopper, her words didn't come so quickly. Watching Ana noticeably struggle for the right thing to say, he finally decided to put her out of her misery.

His large hand wove through and tangled in her hair. With his palm cradling the nape of her neck, Hopper pulled Ana towards him, so their foreheads were pressed against one another. "Tell me when we make it back," he said before placing a chaste kiss to her lips and releasing his hold on her.

Once Eleven and Hopper had been lowered down into the hole; there was no way of telling whether or not things were going well. The air around them pulsed, and the ringing only became louder and louder the longer they were gone. Suddenly, the lights in the office



surrounding Dr. Owens and Ana shone incredibly bright, burning with an intensity to rival the sun.

Then, all of a sudden, things returned to normal. The lights returned to their dim glow, the ringing stopped, and the air around them was still.

Eleven had done it, she had closed the gate and saved them all.



## 30. Chapter 29

Once the dust had settled, and it was clear that everyone had survived and the immediate danger had passed, Ana did what she does best.

She ran.

Ana informed the school she would be taking the next few weeks off due to personal reasons, left word with Flo that she would be heading out of town should anyone be looking for her, Ana wasn't brave enough to relay that message to Hopper herself, and she was gone.

Ana Thompson escaped to the comfort and familiarity of her family's home in Texas.

She needed time to reflect on the mess her life had become, and if it was even worth the effort of fixing.

Ana and her parents watched as reports of the Department of Energy's involvement in Hawkins flooded the news. They asked if she had been aware of the happenings about town and she feigned ignorance, which they readily believed. Their eldest child, the school teacher, would never get herself wrapped up in some government conspiracy.

No one from Hawkins called to check on her during those weeks. No one reached out to see if she was okay. Life...just kind of moved on, and maybe it was time she moved on as well.

When Ana finally made her return to Hawkins, Indiana, it was the night of the Snow Ball Dance.

She had spent the better part of the day with Scott Clarke, preparing the gym with decorations and setting up refreshments, but hadn't run into any of the Demogorgon crew yet.

Nancy and Jonathan arrived at the dance first, intending to help with photo taking and drink pouring. They seemed surprised by Ana's sudden appearance back in their lives but politely waved in greeting



all the same.

One by one, Mike, Will, Lucas, and Max filed in after, sporting their best formal wear. The children each greeted Ana with a hug, saying how much they had missed her and how happy they were she was back.

Dustin's was the last to arrive, and his new hair was a sight to behold. Clearly, he had been spending too much time around Harrington.

Time After Time by Cyndi Lauper began playing through the speakers, and each of the students started pairing off to slow dance until just Mike and Dustin were left solo. Ana watched them awkwardly mill around from her spot behind the welcome table.

Seeing Dustin's request to dance being rejected by several girls had Ana's heart clenching. She thought about offering to dance with him herself, but realized that being caught dancing with your teacher probably would make matters worse. She chuckled in relief when Nancy took pity on the poor boy and danced with him instead.

Every Breath You Take by The Police was playing now, and Mike was sitting off by himself, obviously sulking. The gym doors opened and closed gently, and the sight of this new addition brought a smile to the boy's face.

Eleven stood in the entryway donning and blue and pink polka dot dress, looking beautiful as ever. Ana watched on as they slowly made their way towards each other smiling, said a few words, then headed off to the dance floor.

Watching them all now, seeing them finally happy, made it all the harder. Her decision had been made in Houston, but now, being back in Hawkins, her conviction was strained. She needed some air, needed some space, so Ana took her leave out the gym's back door.

The sight she encountered on the other side would prove to provide her with neither space nor air.

Jim Hopper and Joyce Byers were locked in an intimate embrace while leaning against Joyce's car. Well, isn't that romantic, Ana



thought sarcastically.

She allowed the gym's metal door to loudly slam behind her before stomping off towards her truck.

"Ana!" Hopper called out after her, but she was determined to make her escape as quickly as possible. She didn't want to see him, she didn't want to talk to him, and she certainly didn't want him to see that her eyes were tearing up.

Damn him and his long legs because he was catching up to her in no time, halting her retreat with a well-placed hand around her bicep.

"Hey, will you wait a minute?" He asked, giving the arm he held a little tug to bring her back towards him. She wasn't budging though; she refused to either turn nor let their eyes meet.

"You know, I get it, I really do," she announced as though picking up in the middle of a conversation they were having. Ana had chosen an indiscriminate spot on the horizon and was willing her eyes to rest there and only there.

"What're you talking about," came Hopper's confused reply. "You and Joyce, I get it," she restated, her voice strained from the effort taken to keep her tone even.

"There isn't a me and Joyce," he scoffed, as though it were the most absurd statement she had ever made.

"Isn't there?" Ana made the mistake of looking at him then, and now her eyes locked with his. Fuck, she knew she was easier to read than a book.

She managed to summon some levity into her voice, despite the apparent tension. "I talked to the administration at my old high school; they're willing to give me a job at the start of next year. I'm going back to Texas."

"The hell you are," Hopper replied angrily, still gripping her arm.

This was the band-aid she needed to tear off quickly to avoid elongated pain. The earth needed to be salted so nothing could ever



grow here again.

"She's going to make you feel needed," Ana culminated in the smallest voice he had ever heard her make.

Hopper dropped her arm in favor of cradling Ana's face in both his hands, making sure she was looking at him, making sure she couldn't run away. "But you make me feel wanted."

Her bottom lip gave a weak tremble, but she wasn't there with him yet, Hopper could still see the walls up behind her misting eyes.

"She can give you a family." God, did Ana feel pathetic at that moment.

"I already have a family," he said before dropping his hands from her face and withdrawing a piece of folded up paper from within his jacket pocket. He handed it over to her and began walking away.

"Hopefully you'll reevaluate staying in Hawkins because the kids gonna need a mom," he said without turning back to her.

Gingerly, Ana unfolded the document, afraid of what she might find inside. It was a birth certificate that bore the name Jane Hopper. So, Doctor Owens had held up his end of the bargain.

There was a line, though, that caught her particular attention. One that left her breathless aside from the choked sob that escaped her throat when she read it.

Next to the words 'child of' read her name, Ana Thompson.

Fuck, that was a checkmate if she had ever seen one.

**Season two is a wrap! Now...we wait.**

**Just kidding, I have too much free time on my hands to let this sit until the 4th of July. I'll be posting one-offs before the next season airs. I hope everyone has enjoyed my descent into madness, and I look forward to continuing it!**



## 31. Chapter 30

By the time Ana had finished reading and rereading the paper in her hands nearly a hundred times over, the parking lot was empty.

Joyce and Hopper, along with their cars, were both gone. Music from the dance continued to play muted in the distance. No one was around to see Ana crash back into reality.

Goddamn Hopper and his gall. How are you gonna drop a bombshell like that on someone then bail? No, it wasn't cool, and it wasn't acceptable. So, Ana got in her tuck, aggressively jamming her key into the ignition, and took off towards his trailer by the lake.

Hopper definitely had some warning regarding her impending arrival because the screech Ana's tires made as her car stopped short aside his house was deafening. The booming of her feet stomping up his front steps too gave him time to steel himself. They were going to be alone for the first time in ages, and there were no potential interruptions to deter this oncoming storm.

The door wasn't locked, and, honestly, even if it had been, Ana pushed it open with such force that Hopper was confident she could have broken the lock altogether.

As Ana made her dramatic and excessively noisy entrance, Hopper tensed from his place behind the dining room table. Ana briefly wondered if he had chosen that spot intentionally to create a barrier between them should she start throwing punches or objects.

Stepping inside the house, Ana's march was halted by the door swinging back at her from the force with which it bounced off the adjacent wall. She had to throw her right arm out just in time to stop the wooden barrier from forcibly whacking her in the face. The scene caused a chuckle to leave Hopper's lips, and he realized too late that it probably wasn't best to laugh at the expense of an irate woman.

The slip up earned him a withering glare from Ana as she, in a now more calmly fashion, stepped further inside the house and slammed the offending door behind her. The air between them filled with



electricity as they stared one another down.

"What the fuck?" Each syllable received emphasis as the words passed her lips.

Hopper wasn't sure exactly which indiscretion he was supposed to be justifying first, putting her name on the birth certificate or leaving her in the parking lot to process that information alone.

"I thought-" He didn't get to explain exactly what it was he thought before she interrupted him while making a beeline for his present location.

Ana stopped just short of him on the other side of the table, leaving the obstruction between them. "You thought, what? That some grand gesture would win me back? That it would make me forget all the secrets and forgive all your lies?"

Hopper's mouth opened and closed several times, but no words were forming.

"Take off your pants." The shift was so sudden that Hopper was sure he had misheard her. "What?"

"I said, take off your pants," Ana repeated while stripping off her jacket and throwing it indiscriminately in the direction of the living room. Hopper still wasn't moving though; he stood as still as a statue until Ana's blouse joined her jacket on the carpet. The image of her standing there, shirtless in his living room, finally coaxed Hopper into action, and he abandoned his spot behind the table just as Ana began undoing her skirt.

Halting her movements, Hopper pulled her towards him with a hand on each hip, covering her mouth with his own. It wasn't a sweet nor gentle kiss, it was hot and heavy, with teeth clashing and tongues battling for dominance.

"I'm sorry," Hopper said when he pulled away for air, one hand now tangled in the hair at the nape of her neck while the other remained on her hip, keeping their bodies close. "Shut up," Ana groaned without missing a beat. She began kissing down the column of his



neck while desperately pawing at Hopper's flannel and shirt in an effort to remove the layers standing between them.

Something akin to a growl escaped from Hopper's throat before Ana found herself pushed up against the very table that had been separating them moments before. She let out a startled gasp as the table's edge dug into her lower back, but the discomfort was only momentary. Gripping her hips in his large hands, Hopper lifted her up and onto the surface in a seated position, before continuing his assault on her lips.

As Ana reached for his belt, Hopper stopped her again, taking both her hands in his own. Time slowed down as he inspected their intertwined fingers, only heavy breaths filling the air between them.

When his eyes finally tilted up to connect with hers, Ana swore she felt her heart clench. "You know I love you, right?" His question was punctuated with a well-placed kiss on the fingers of her left hand.

"I know, and I love you too," Ana answered while gently ranking her fingernails through his beard, an action that caused Hopper to close his eyes and lean ever so slightly into her touch.

When his eyes reopened, there was a renewed lust in them that Ana didn't have enough time to process before Hopper was pouncing on her again, pushing her back onto the table, and finishing what she had started earlier.

After the moans filling his trailer had died off, after they'd both been thoroughly spent, Hopper carried a weak-legged Ana to his bedroom where he gently placed her atop the bed and scooted in beside her, pulling the sheets up and over them both.

Out of reflex, Ana tucked herself into his side, placing her head on his shoulder, letting her hand rest on his chest, and entwining their legs.

His laughter reverberating against her cheek had Ana looking up at Hopper and raising an eyebrow in question. "The grand gesture worked then?" Boy, did he look smug, so Ana delivered a pinch to his side in an attempt to taper his self-satisfaction. Her efforts seemed in vain because his response was to use the arm wrapped around Ana's



shoulder to pull her close enough to him that Hopper could drop a kiss to her forehead, still chuckling to himself.

"You know, we've got a kid now. You realize your sex life is non-existent from here on out, right?" That seemed to wipe the smirk off Hopper's face and right onto Ana's.

"Hey, not non-existent," he tried to argue though he didn't seem confident.

"I spend all day with those buggers; they have a habit of popping up at the worst of times." They both shared a laugh at her assessment before the seriousness of their situation fell over them like a blanket.

"You sure you're okay with this?" Ana asked quietly while eyeing a spot on his bedroom wall. "It's a big step. I'd understand if-

Hopper pulling her up onto the pillow beside him so they could be eye level cut Ana's sentiment short. "I wouldn't have done it if I wasn't okay with it." He spoke with such authority and finality that any dispute she had died on her tongue.

"Now, if the kids out of the house for the next few hours, then we better make use of the last of our alone time," Hopper surmised before rolling them over, so Ana was beneath him once again.

**Well, this chapter was a little bit slutty, wasn't it? I'm going to blame all the cold medicine I'm currently on. So, if this chapter reads like a fever dream, that's because it literally is.**

**Per usual, I treasure all the reviews, follows and favorites you bestow upon me — a tip of the wine glass to you all.**



## 32. The One with Hopper

"Heaven on earth, what have you done?" Ana exclaimed, aghast. She might as well be clutching her pearls from the shock of the sight before her.

"What? You said Tom Selleck was hot." Hopper's defense was weak, at best. Sure, Selleck has looked mighty fine in *High Road to China*, but Ana's comment on such had hardly been a call to action.

"I did, but that didn't mean I wanted you to go and get rid of the beard." No, this drastic measure had Smokey and the Bandit written all over it. Was this one of those midlife crises Ana had always heard rumors about? She supposed that was the risk you run when saddling yourself to an older man.

"So you don't like it?" Hopper asked, wrapping his arms around her middle from behind, and attaching his lips to the spot on Ana's neck that always left her speechless. The dinner she had been preparing in their kitchen was left abandoned.

"It tickles," she let out breathily while his lips continued their path, unabated, along her nape.

"I wonder," he said as he nipped at the sensitive skin, "if it tickles everywhere?"

Before Ana had any time to prepare herself, she was spun around and lifted onto the kitchen counter beside the forgotten vegetables she had previously been cutting. Hopper seemed mighty pleased with himself at the surprised gasp that fell from her lips.

"What about Eleven? Sorry, Jane?" Ana found the sense to question and correct herself, while Hopper worked on the button of her jeans.

"She's at Mike's until 8:00," he answered distractedly, finally unfastening the barrier.

Ana grabbed Hopper's jaw and pulled him in for one final passionate kiss, before he yanked the aforementioned jeans to her ankles, and



kneeled on the tile before her.

It turns out that the mustache did tickle everywhere, but Ana found that she didn't mind the new sensation all that much.

**I've had many margaritas tonight, and I want to make one thing abundantly clear; IDGAF what happens with Jopper this season! I know, I know, we've all seen the trailer where they're holding hands, and Joyce says 'our kids.' WHATEVER. I'm gonna do me, and Ana, even if I have to self impose amnesia for the better part of the season. The human mind sees and perceives only what it chooses to. I'd throw out a portmanteau here for Hopper and Ana if I could think of a good one, but I currently cannot. Good day!**



### 33. The One with Billy

Billy Hargrove sat in the driver's seat of his blue Camaro outside Hawkins Middle. Revving his souped-up engine, Billy looked the epitome of a bad boy, equipped with a cigarette hanging loosely from his lips, and a wrathful scowl resting upon his face. He fired up the engine again, a non-verbal warning to his step-sister, Max Mayfield, indicating that should she not hurry along, he'd be leaving her behind.

SMACK! The sound of a hand colliding with the roof of his vehicle jarred Billy out of his smolder.

Ana would happily admit that the small leap of fright the boy exhibited at her impromptu entrance, brought a smirk to her face. She leaned into the open driver's window, with both hands braced on the doorframe. "Hargrove."

Billy slowly withdrew the cigarette from his mouth and held it between the fingers of his right hand before a cocky grin slipped over his features. "Ms. T," he said, rolling his head along the headrest to glance up at her.

"It's Ms. Thompson," she corrected with narrowed eyes. "Right, Ms. Thompson. I apologize." Billy's voice betrayed that he wasn't sorry, not in the slightest. No, Billy Hargrove thought he was inexplicably smooth and charming, and perhaps that overconfident swagger worked on naive teenagers, but Ana was decidedly neither of those things.

"Do you know where we are, Hargrove?" Her question caused his smile to faulted ever so slightly; did she think he was high or something?"

Trying to maintain his cocksure attitude, Billy answered: "we're at the school, ma'am." Ana physically bristled at the outdated title: she squeezed her eyes shut in an effort to compose herself, while her grip on the doorframe tightened.

"Oh good, so it's not that you're too dumb to understand." The smirk



was long gone for Billy's face. "Wh-What?" He asked, unsure where the conversation was heading.

Ana leaned further into the space between them, her countenance devoid of any mirth. "I figured, you had to be too dumb to understand where you were because that's the only possible explanation for you driving around this school zone like you're in the Indy 500."

Neither blinked as they stared each other down.

Billy broke; first, he licked his lips and looked Ana up and down as that shit-eating grin returned to his face. "You gonna call the police chief on me?"

He probably posed the question as a challenge, but the bark of laughter it drew from Ana proved Billy's confidence was misplaced.

Ana took a step away from the Camero as she spotted Max, making her way towards them in the distance. Looking back at Billy, Ana corrected him: "You're sorely mistaken if you think Chief Hopper is the scary one in our relationship. But, you're well aware that girls can handle business, right, Billy?" Her pointed glance back at Max wasn't lost on him, and Ana could almost see the image of Max wielding a baseball bat flash behind his eyes.

The redhead in question was almost to the car, but Ana wasn't finished with the teenage boy in front of her yet; stepping back up to his window, so that only the two of them could hear. "I don't know what has to happen to make a young man wake up every day hating the world, but taking your anger out on everyone else around you won't stop it."

Retreating several feet, Ana greeted Max as the younger girl approached the vehicle and climbed inside, next to her step-brother.

"Y'all get home safe now," Ana offered before heading back in the direction of Hawkins Middle. Billy watched the school teacher's retreating form for a moment, before throwing his long since extinguished cigarette butt out the window, onto the spot where Ana had previously been standing.



Ignoring Max's questioning glance, Billy pulled out of the parking spot and started the drive back to their home at a more reasonable speed than anyone had seen him drive before.

**So, season three was....something? I'm gonna need a few days to process exactly what it was I just watched. In the meantime, I'll continue to bless my readers with these little drabbles as I choose the best course with which to proceed. Gracias!**



### 34. The One with Steve

*What is one lesson you've learned this year that, you feel, will extend through the rest of your life?*

It wasn't the most tasking end-of-year essay since there was no particular right or wrong answer, but it was an assignment intended to encourage self-reflection and forethought. Some of the responses were still lacking, to say the least.

James wrote a diatribe about how stupid and boring English class had been. The lesson James proclaimed to have learned, was that he was never going to read another book once he dropped out, which he intended to do in high school. This assessment caused Ana to roll her eyes while grading, but at least James had stayed within the parameters of the rubric, so small victories.

His partner in crime, Troy's, essay had been somewhat surprising upon the first scan. He discussed the importance of not underestimating others because you might not know what someone has been through and, therefore, might be capable of. It was actually a rather insightful paper, and Ana was close to giving him a perfect score until she reached the final paragraph. Troy's conclusion surmised that you needed to be careful around freaks because they might be friends with even bigger weirdos, and freaks and weirdos get away with everything. So close, Ana thought before slapping a large C+ on the assignment.

Ana was beginning to read Max's paper, which appeared to be about the benefits of being open to change when she saw in her peripheral a familiar head of hair hesitate outside her doorway. By the time Ana looked up from her reading, the male Farrah Fawcett was gone, and she assumed he had moved on to find his new BFF, Dustin Henderson.

Speaking of Dustin, Ana started looking over his work once she'd finished scoring Max's. His seemed to be a harrowing tale about the dangers girls pose to a friend group. There was a footnote informing Ana that she was not the type of girl he was referring to in the essay because she apparently didn't qualify as a girl to the party. Dustin



Henderson was a boy who thoroughly understood how to flatter a lady.

After that rollercoaster of a thesis, Ana was intending to pack up for the night and finish grading the rest of the finals on another day. Stacking and straightening the incomplete pile of papers, that same mop of voluptuous hair appeared back at her class entrance, but this time the adjoining body took a hesitant step inside the room.

"Harrington, what brings you to Hawkins Middle? Did they send you back because you don't know the difference between Germans and Nazis?" Ana asked with a smirk while sitting back in her chair and folding her hands to rest atop her stomach.

Steve Harrington chuckled sheepishly at her mock question and ventured further into the room. Scratching the back of his neck in a nervous tick, Steve kept glancing back at the door as though he were contemplating bolting at any moment. Seeing the usually confident boy look so unassured, had Ana sitting back up in her chair, switching to seriousness.

"Steve, you okay?" Ana attempted again, realizing the high school senior still hadn't spoken since entering her room. "Yeah, yeah," he said while waving off her obvious concern at his unusual behavior. "Okay," Ana began wearily. "Then what brings you to my humble abode?" She asked while gesturing around the English classroom.

It was evident that Steve still hadn't completely committed to whatever had brought him to Ana in the first place, and he took one last longing look at the hallway just on the other side of the door.

Ana waited patiently for Steve to strike up the nerve to ask whatever he had come here for; she didn't want to push him when the teen was already noticeably uncomfortable.

"Can I ask you a favor, Ms. T?" Ana didn't correct the casual title as she would with some of the less familiar students; fighting monsters together allowed for some additional rights, she supposed.

"Ask away," Ana instructed. "As long as it's not to buy you beer. I'm not going to buy you beer, Harrington." She hoped her attempt at



humor would undercut some of the nervousness radiating off of the other party.

The joke seemed to have done its intended job. Steve let out a small chuckle, and visibly lost some of the tension in his shoulders, though he didn't relax entirely. "I was wondering if you could write me a letter of recommendation?"

The question wasn't at all what Ana had been expecting, and it explained some of the boy's nervousness but didn't justify it entirely. Did he really think she'd deny his request?

Steve kept on mumbling while Ana mulled it over. "It's just that you're an English teacher, and I know you can write well. I'm probably not even going to get into college anyway. I'll probably just end up working for my dad. You know what, never mind." He concluded and started making his break for the door.

"Wait!" Ana's shout stopped Steve in his mad dash for the exit. "Of course, I'll write you a letter of recommendation. Harrington, of course, I can write you one."

Turning back towards Ana, seated behind her desk, all of the anxiety had returned to Steve's stature. "Are you sure? Because if it's too much trouble-"

She cut his backtracking short, now the one waving off his obvious concern. "It's not too much trouble. I'll happily do it."

A timid smile came upon Steve's face as he accepted that Ana didn't intend to blow him off. "Okay. Thanks, I appreciate it," he concluded, then scurried away before either of them could change their mind.

Ana laughed to herself at the teenager's antics, before pulling out a clean slip of paper, and began drafting the requested letter of recommendation. Once she had finished, it read thus:

*To Whom It May Concern,*

*There are many qualities by which to measure a man.*

*Some are generous to those in need. Others are brave in the face of*



*adversity. Many are intelligent, either in a scholarly regard, or to do with common sense. There are those who possess an unwavering loyalty, and too few who are honest to a fault.*

*Steve Harrington encompasses all of the aforementioned traits, but they are not what makes him indispensable. No, Mr. Harrington's greatest quality is that he is resilient.*

*In the last year, I have watched this young man struggle, learn, and, most importantly, change. While it is easy, for one to be unwavering in their beliefs. While it is simpler, to face uncertainty and turn one's back in favor of the familiar. It is far harder to adapt and grow, even if it means your foundation is irrevocably altered.*

*Steve Harrington is not the same man today, as he was yesterday, and he will be a different man tomorrow. I know this because he will never stop progressing and bettering himself, whereas others will falter in their contentment.*

*Regardless of where he should end up, this young man will be a value to whichever domain he occupies. Not only because he strives to advance himself, but because he ensures the advancement of others along with him.*

*To conclude, I strongly recommend Steve Harrington acceptance as a benefit to your campus, and strongly discourage his dismissal as a detriment, in turn. Please do not hesitate to contact me regarding any further inquiries into Mr. Harrington's capabilities.*

*Best Regards,*

*Ana Thompson*



## 35. Another Author's Note

I know, I hate me too.

Just wanted to update everyone on a few things, rather than let y' all hang in radio science.

I've got two more drabbles planned, The One with Joyce and The One with Eleven, before I start on season three.

Oh, season three. Gotta say I wasn't a fan overall. Not for the obvious reasons, if you've already watched it, and if you haven't, I'm not about to spoil it. Some parts were significant; I loved Mrs. Wheeler's development. Other elements, though, I found lacking; many of our main characters seemed to have lost their way. However, I'm just being a writing snob, and you can feel whichever way you want about it!

Speaking of writing snobs, this week classes for my English PH.D. started. I know, you're thinking, why isn't she better at writing if she's going to be a doctor in the field? Well, I can compose an analytical essay like no one's business, but writing fiction is a STRUGGLE. My point is: I'll have less time as of late to update. I'm sorry.

So, please be patient with your dear, old, drunken Edith Sidebottom (does anyone even get this reference or am I just way too old?) Know that I see all of your reviews, favorites and follows while I avoid dissecting the influences of Robert Frost, Thoreau, and Emerson.

**Now, shout outs to all the people who have made me smile the last week or so:**

51stormfastpitch, AcklesIdjit, Adelene Abnormal, AgentofWriting, Boovie, ComicGeek, CurbItKirby, EmmaOBrien00, Jschoolio, Kayleeann the dreamer, Luckygirl1013, MadisonJM, NamineX13, Neon Leon, RaysonInTheSun, Readerlesly, Simone140089, TeamFreeWill2, The true Hero of Skill, WaywardandWanderlust, anelle25, anongone, baezteresa25, caseymarierose, doubtorange, fantasyqueen98, justanothermewlingquim, laxtjedi, lilylittle, lyona5, madimoo1328, medrinksprite247, and yamikojigoku. Y'all are on top



of those favorites. I appreciate each and every single one.

BarefootInThePark, BlackVeilBrides LoverX3, Bumblebee1013, Color me cruel, Dream01, Ensign Outlander, Lara Barnes, LoverGirl007, MagicBrownie, Night-Storms, Skylark Sky, Suzululu08, , Team-lets-free-will, The Moving Crossbow, Volleyball Babe22, darkoni66, emiliaMcCoy, emmymay96, fantasyqueen98, frenchtoast100, Lizziesgreyjoy, moonchild-things, purpleheart689, and wolfgirl112995. I'd question anyone who would actively choose to follow me anywhere, but in this sense, I'll allow it, and say: thank you!

CalvinHobbesGatsby, you were my first ever review, and I'll never forget you! Neon Leon, The true Hero of Skill, lyona5, and Dream01, I do enjoy your enthusiasm! Suzululu08, your reviews are insightful, and The One with Eleven will be for you. CurbItKirby, you came out of nowhere and hit me with some constructive criticism that I APPRECIATE; The One with Joyce will be for you.

To all the people who I've inadvertently neglected mentioning: you're just as important, and I see EACH. AND. EVERY. ONE. OF. YOU.

Hang in there, everyone; I've got a wild ride yet to come!



### 36. The One with Joyce

Somewhere, just beyond view, a fly buzzed insistently in the dimly lit kitchen.

Ana Thompson felt as though the unseen insect was mocking her. That the sound everyone assumed emanated from its wings flapping, was actually that of tiny snickers.

The lyrics to Happiness Is A Warm Gun by The Beatles kept playing in her head: 'I need a fix 'cause I'm going down...'

*Ana had tried to be cool and understanding, she really had, but she wasn't known for being particularly adept at either. More importantly, though, she had run out of patience.*

*Ana was sitting on the porch, smoking a cigarette when Hopper approached the cabin. That should have been the first indicator that something was off; Ana hardly ever smoked, and there was a fresh pack sitting next to her on the patio table.*

*"Is El home?" Hopper asked, exhaustion coating his voice. It had been a long day, and it was about to get even longer.*

*Ana didn't look at him; instead, she stubbed out the remains of her old cigarette in favor of lighting a fresh one. "El is out with the party," she answered shortly. Her chain-smoking and lack of engagement was definitely the second warning.*

*Hopper hovered on the steps, noting her concerning behavior wearily, before opting against commenting on it. He intended to head inside to change out of his uniform when Ana's next statement paused his progress.*

*"You know, I have extended family in Utah. You want me to call down there and inquire as to how the whole polygamy thing works?"*

*It took a few beats for the question to bounce around in Hopper's brain. "What're you on about?" He asked with a heavy sigh.*

*Ana was looking at him now, and the light from her cigarette illuminated the searing glare she was offering in his direction.*



*"Polygamy, the practice of having more than one romantic partner. Seems like a thing you're into. Just figured I could do some inquiring on the matter, find out what we're getting into moving forward." She said it so naturally, as though they were discussing the weather, and peered back off in the direction of the darkened woods.*

*They were on the cusp of an argument, Hopper could see that plain as day, and he could guess as to its origination. However, he wasn't going to engage in her provoking willingly.*

*"I'm not interested in polygamy," he stated, affronted.*

*A mocking smirk took its place on Ana's lips. "You aren't? Does your other girlfriend know that?"*

*Now, Hopper was throwing his hands up in frustration. "If this is about Joyce-"*

*Ana stopped his rant short. "So you do count her as your other girlfriend. Good to know," she stated with a sarcastic chuckle.*

*If they were going to have this fight, and there was no denying that was the direction the pair were headed, Hopper would be damned if he was going to do so empty-handed. Withdrawing his own pack from the depths of his pocket, he lit a cigarette as well, and took the first pull in deeply, hoping it would calm his already heightened nerves.*

*Leaning his hip against the railing, Hopper cocked his head to look at Ana. "What's your problem?" The question came out sharper than intended, and her raised eyebrows told him that the tone was wholly unappreciated.*

*Ana took another drag, contemplating her next words. "I thought I was past this sharing shit." She intended for the statement to sound harsh, but it resonated as meek more than anything, and that just increased her frustration. Ana had long ago told Hopper of her past relationship with a man whose eyes tended to wander, but he thought he'd done a better job of reassuring her.*

*There was that heavy sigh emanating from his chest again, as Hopper ran a hand over his face. "Joyce just watched Bob die, would it kill you to be*



a little more sensitive?" That was the entirely wrong approach, and Hopper could see that the moment her demeanor shifted.

Ana leaned towards him, balancing her elbows upon her knees, with a scowl gracing her features. "I've been plenty sensitive," she sneered. "I'm just struggling to understand why you seem to be at her every beck and call."

"I'm not-" He started, crossing his arms over his chest, but, again, Ana didn't let him finish.

"Why you feel the need to go hang out with her at Melvald's." Shit. He didn't know Ana was aware of his semi-regular trips to Joyce's workplace, and the shock showed on his face.

Ana let out a humorless laugh and sat back in her chair. "Didn't think I knew about that, did you?" Hopper didn't have a decent explanation, so he chose the smart move of keeping his mouth shut. "She called earlier and let that little nugget slip by accident, seemed pretty surprised that I wasn't aware you two hung out often." Again, Ana only received silence in return.

"I told you before, Jim, I'll get out of the way if that's what you want." Ana's voice had lost some of its edge, and she was lighting up a third cigarette to keep her hands busy, to minimize the shaking.

Hopper abandoned his place against the railing in favor of crouching in front of Ana's chair. The move reminded her of how adults approach children: bring yourself down to their level, so they don't perceive you as being demeaning. She resented the gesture. Hopper withdrew the freshly lit cigarette from between her fingers and stamped it out in the ashtray so that he could take her hands in his. Ana tried to shake him off, but Hopper held fast.

"You're Eleven's mother, nothing is going to change that," he reassured with a slight squeeze to her hands. Ana wanted to melt at his words and touch but knew that if she did, this argument would just arise again on a later date. No, they needed to resolve this persistent issue here and now.

"Am I? Or am I just the interim babysitter until something better arises?" She challenged stubbornly, and this time she was successful in shaking her



*hands loose of his grip.*

*From the look on Hopper's face, Ana's words might as well have been delivered as a physical slap. He stood back up and moved away from her, towards the door. "You know what, if you're not going to listen to me, then why don't you just go ask Joyce yourself?" Hopper shot back before entering the cabin and slamming the door shut behind him.*

Now, sitting in Joyce's kitchen, hearing that damned fly taunt her, Ana was regretting taking Hopper up on the offer.

"Ana," Joyce said, knocking her out of her stupor. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

Ana sucked in a breath from between clenched teeth. She was here; there was no point in turning back now. "Is there something going on between you and Jim?" There, she had gotten the hard part out of the way.

Joyce lightly chuckled at her question. "Oh, honey, no. Nothing is going on between Hopper and me." Honey? The term of endearment reminded Ana that she was once again being talked down to like a child. She despised the implication that she was acting juvenile, being dramatic.

"He's awfully protective of you," Ana asserted. Possessive, was more the word she was angling for, but Ana let it rest at protective.

"We're friends," Joyce assured while busying herself around the kitchen. Joyce's search for a distraction told Ana the older woman was growing uncomfortable with the topic of conversation.

Ana's eyes turned to slits as she watched Joyce. "You two seemed more than friendly at the Snow Ball Dance." Ana was growing tired of repeatedly being dismissed, and if she had to apply some pressure to get the truth finally, then she wasn't above doing so.

Joyce's movements halted at the insinuation, and she slowly turned back around to face Ana, who had an eyebrow raised in challenge. "Ana," Joyce started carefully, "Hopper and I have been through a lot together."



"I understand that," Ana responded shortly.

"See, I don't think you do," Joyce remarked while pointing an accusing finger at the younger woman.

Ana was beyond fed up at this point, so her next response came out as biting. "Then why don't you try and explain it to me because Jim sure hasn't been able to."

The air around them was filled with tension as the two women appraised one another. Joyce Byers was a slight woman, both in build and manner. There was an air about her that screamed frail, and it was no wonder that Hopper felt the constant need to protect her. Joyce appeared too weak to fend for herself, and so she'd always need a savior to be strong for her. Joyce was all the things Ana had taught herself not to be, and now she was going to be neglected for it.

Ana abruptly stood from her seat at the kitchen table. "It was a mistake coming here. I'm sorry." Ana wasn't remotely sorry, but she wanted to escape the stifling environment as quickly as possible.

Before she could push back her chair and head for the door, Joyce was stopping her. "Wait. It's because of my ex-husband, Lonnie." The admission had Ana slowly sinking back into her seat at the table.

Joyce floundered for a few moments over how to start her explanation. "When Lonnie and I first split up, things got really bad." Ana stayed quiet and waited for her to continue.

"The night I threw him out," Joyce took a shaky breath before proceeding. "The night I threw him out, Lonnie got violent, and the boys had to call Hopper." Ana's eyes were as wide as dinner plates. This hadn't been the direction she'd expected the conversation to take, and she was regretting her insistence now.

"Then everything happened with Will disappearing, and now Bob. Oh, Bob..." Ana watched as Joyce crumpled into tears before her, and she felt like a right ass for pressing the fragile woman so hard.

Leaving her seat, Ana rounded the table and took the weeping



woman into her arms, stroking her hair in an effort to be comforting. "He's just worried," Joyce continued through the tears that were soaking Ana's shirt. "He just worries about everyone so much."

"I know, Joyce. I know, and I'm sorry." This time, Ana actually was sorry, and she knew that she wouldn't be bringing up the topic of Joyce and Hopper's friendship again.



## 37. Chapter 31

*The marriage was doomed, that much was painfully obvious. It wasn't the known history of lies and fighting that made it apparent, no, it was a look in the eyes of the bride and groom as they stood before friends and family in the little chapel. There was a notable fear that went beyond usual wedding day jitters that rested behind their eyes. A fear of faults, resentments, and too many things still left unsaid.*

*Standing at the altar in her white gown accented in delicate lace, what a joke the purity of the color white was in this instance, the bride's hands shook noticeably. The groom in his ill-fitting suit dabbed at his damp forehead repeatedly, an action that couldn't be blamed on the heat of the room. Perhaps they didn't know one another well enough to be tied together for life. Perhaps they weren't ready to fully commit to every hardship that goes along with being bonded to someone eternally. Yet, the vows were said, even if not in complete earnest, and the deed was done.*

*The reception was equally stale, full of false congratulations as the guests tried to enjoy the evening. Tried to celebrate despite their misgivings.*

*Ana couldn't tolerate the false niceties any longer and departed as soon as there was a lull in the festivities. Now, standing back inside her and Hopper's cabin, Ana wondered if good things just weren't built to withstand the test of time.*

"Ana, you're back!" Came a squeal before the said woman was knocked off balance by a smaller force attaching itself to her middle. Dropping the suitcase she'd been holding, Ana quickly returned the hug Eleven was so emphatically offering.

Exiting their bedroom to explore the source of El's outburst, Hopper found the two embraced in the middle of the living room, and the sight brought a small smile to his lips.

"You're home early," he said, strolling over to join the two. Throwing an arm over Ana's shoulder, Hopper dropped a kiss to her temple before asking: "So, how was your cousin's wedding?"

"A complete trainwreck," Ana answered with a slight shrug after



breaking away from the three-way hug. "Shotgun marriages tend to be," was the only response Hopper had to offer at her apparent detachment.

Desperate for a change of topic, Ana asked: "How were things here? Did you two manage alright without me for a few days?" The response her question received was less than enthusiastic. El huffed and stomped back into her room before slamming the door shut behind her with her mind. Hopper, in turn, rolled his eyes at the teenager's antics before also turning and retreating into their room. Clearly, things had not gone well in her absence, Ana thought before trailing after Hopper, whom she found seated on the edge of their bed, resting his elbows on his knees and head in hands.

"Things went that well then?" Ana questioned while leaning against the doorframe with crossed arms. Hopper responded to her inquiry, but the hands still covering his face muted the words. "Come again?" Ana pressed further with a raised eyebrow.

"They won't keep their hands off each other!" Hopper exclaimed frustrated, finally dropping his hands so Ana could fully hear him. She didn't have to ask to whom he was referring, but the bark of laughter that escaped her lips at his response earned Ana a sharp glare from across the room. "Well, what would you like me to say?" Ana asked, slowly coming to sit next to him on the edge of the bed, "like father like daughter." His glare grew even sharper upon hearing her words and seeing the mocking smirk that rest upon Ana's lips.

"That's not remotely funny," Hopper said, pointing an accusatory finger in her direction, but Ana wasn't nearly done with her teasing yet. "Speaking of shotgun weddings..." Ana started, but before she could even finish the sentence, she found herself pressed back onto the bed, with Hopper's face hovering just over hers.

"You're not as funny as you think, Ms. Thompson," Hopper assured as his breath gently fanned over her face from the close proximity. A mischievous twinkle shone behind her eyes, "you're right, Chief Hopper. I'm actually hilarious."

A silence fell between the two as they gazed into one another's eyes. Hopper's shoulders dropped most of their tension as Ana idly ran her



fingers up and down the expanse of his back. Ana leaned into his touch as Hopper ran his palm over her left cheek, before threading his fingers through the hair at the side of her head. He held her there as though attempting to convey that he was afraid she'd disappear again.

"We both missed you," Hopper whispered with gentle eyes, and Ana felt herself melting. "I missed you both, too," she conceded softly. The moment was far too sentimental and vulnerable for Ana's liking, and the mischievous twinkle quickly returned to her eyes. "Care to show me how much you missed me?" Ana challenged.

It took no further goading on her part before Hopper surged forward and claimed her lower lip with his own.

**Surprise, bitches! I'm not dead; I'm just the worst! I could make excuses about how I've been insanely busy, which is entirely true, but mostly I just needed distance before I could appreciate season three because, as it appears, I'm altogether unpleasable. Can't promise the updates will be consistent because, again, super busy, but at least we're over the proverbial hill. I hope you enjoyed my foray into misdirection; I intend to dabble in it frequently for season three!**



## 38. Chapter 32

Did Ana possess the ability to make good decisions? She honestly wasn't quite sure anymore.

The mixture of kids screaming, the incessant sound of water splashing, and the blazing sun beating down upon her body were giving her a raging migraine. Why had she agreed to manage the pool again this summer? She couldn't quite remember her reasoning beyond having to support her mild shopping habit.

Perhaps a better justification was that an idle mind is the devil's playground, and Ana was definitely trying to keep her mind occupied lest it wanders.

The sound of a whistle blowing twice broke Ana out of her reverie. The shrill noise was abruptly followed by her least favorite employee, Billy Hargrove, calling some poor kid a lard ass, and asserting that if the kid got caught running again, he would be banned from the pool for life.

Well, Ana thought getting up from her perch under an oversized umbrella, that wouldn't do at all.

By the time Ana reached Billy, he was casually flirting with four middle-aged women who were unabashedly checking out the barely legal teen.

Some women really have no shame, Ana pondered before approaching Billy from behind and yanking harshly on the whistle string hung around his neck.

The force of Ana's tug pulled Billy back a few steps and halted any forward momentum. Said boy whipped around to confront whoever dared to ambush him, but stopped short upon realizing it was Ana. The look of indignation immediately fell from his face and was promptly replaced by one of unease. Apparently, their little talk the previous school year hadn't escaped his mind just yet. The thought brought with it a sense of pride and a small smirk to Ana's face.



Dropping the string now that she had his complete attention, Ana considered the younger man through narrowed eyes for a moment before asking: "How many times do I gotta tell you, Hargrove, you don't have the authority to ban anyone from the pool?" Billy floundered for a moment, attempting to formulate a reply, but Ana cut him short. "Just get up on the stand, and stop performing for the Stepford Wives, capisce?"

"Yes, Ms. Thompson," was the reply Ana received with a slight scowl before Billy turned on his heel and did just as she'd asked. That was one problem solved; now, it was time to address another.

Hand on hip, and a disapproving look adorning her face, Ana rounded on the middle-aged gawkers, her lips set in a firm line. Giving each woman a look of reproach over the top of her sunglasses, Ana shook her head judgmentally.

"Gross, ladies. Just gross. Especially you, Wheeler. Wasn't he in class with your kid? For shame." Ana didn't stick around to humor any responses to her shaming, nor looks of reproach or guilt, before she headed back to the manager's office, hoping to drown out the endless noise, and quell her surmounting headache.

Ana had managed to doze off for who knows how long before her peaceful silence was interrupted by a knock on the office door. Another lifeguard, Heather, poked her head in to announce that Ana had received a phone call. Groaning, and wishing that the day would simply end, Ana followed Heather back out to the front, picking up the awaiting telephone.

"Hello?" Ana called into the receiver, rubbing her aching temples with her free hand. "Ana, it's Joyce," announced a voice on the other end. Adjusting the earpiece to rest between her head and shoulder, Ana leaned against the counter, awaiting what could only be troubling news from Joyce. "How can we at Hawkins Public Pool be of service to you, Joyce?" Ana asked tiredly.

Joyce, clearly giving no credence to Ana's sarcastic question, blazed on with her original purpose for calling. "I just wanted to give you a heads up. Hopper stopped by Melvald's earlier, and he was sporting some serious crazy eyes." Ana sighed loudly through the speaker; she



could guess precisely where this conversation was headed.

If Joyce noticed Ana's utterance of distress, she gave no indication, because she proceeded with the conversation as though there had been no interruption. "Yeah," Joyce continued, "he's pretty riled up about Eleven and Mike's-"the older woman paused, searching for the most accurate designation.

"Blossoming relationship?" Ana offered in return. "That's the one," Joyce agreed. "I told him to have a mature and calm conversation with the both of them. Even helped him write out a speech."

Imagining Hopper having a calm conversation with two hormonal teenagers, drew a chuckle from Ana's lips. "I'm sure that went over well," she replied with a slight eye roll. The absurdity of the prospect had Joyce chuckling in return. "I know. He wasn't exactly receptive to my advice," Joyce conceded, "but hopefully, he'll take it into consideration."

Allowing her eyes to wander over the pool area as she spoke with Joyce, Ana took in the familiar sights: children shouting and playing, women sunbathing, and the occasional adult trying to swim laps amidst the chaos. However, a particularly troubling image had Ana cutting the phone call short; she'd spotted another adult who certainly needed the divine intervention of a level headed adult female.

"Joyce, I really appreciate the help, and I'll try to talk Hopper off the ledge when I get home, but right now, I gotta go," Ana announced. Clearly put off by the abrupt conclusion to their conversation, Joyce stuttered for a moment. "Oh, well. Alright. I'll just speak to you later, then."

"Yep. Bye, Joyce," Ana responded quickly before dropping the phone back on its receiver and making a beeline for Mrs. Wheeler and Billy Hargrove.

Remember to leave room for Jesus! That's the phrase Ana wanted so desperately to yell when approaching the two, though she somehow managed to squelch the impulse. But, hey, if it could shame middle schoolers into behaving, maybe it'd work the same for nefarious



adults.

Finally making her way to the other side of the pool, Ana had to choke back a gag upon hearing Billy say: "It will be the workout of your life." The smug look on his face, combined with Mrs. Wheeler's obviously flustered posture, made Ana confident she'd throw up in her mouth. Did she not babysit enough children? Now she had to add adult wrangler to her list of duties?

The two jumped apart when Ana snuck up behind them and said, unnecessarily loud, "You know what will be the workout of your life, Hargrove? Cleaning the toilets in the boy's locker room."

Upon her intrusion, Mrs. Wheeler at least had the decency to look ashamed, while Billy looked thoroughly annoyed at the interruption. His dissatisfaction brought Ana a sense of joy for the second time that day; everyone loves a good cock block.

When neither made a move to scurry away as Ana had hoped, she placed a firm hand on Billy's shoulder and not so gently pushed him in the direction of the locker rooms. "Hop to it, Hargrove!"

The boy eventually scurried away to handle his newly assigned duty, and Ana was finally left alone with the Wheeler matriarch. Letting out a huff, Ana lifted the sunglasses covering her eyes to rest atop her head and considered the woman in front of her. Mrs. Wheeler was everything Ana feared becoming: a housewife in an unhappy marriage who didn't feel content with her circumstances. Basically, a woman who had settled for a life that didn't provide fulfillment.

Regardless, none of these were good enough reasons to act like a complete moron.

Now, talking sense into adults is a whole different ball game from children. Children's brains are pliable; they're susceptible to influence. They simply don't know any better and so they're likely to listen. Adults, on the other hand, they believe they know everything, and you can't tell them otherwise. The approach has to be exact and intentional to evoke the intended response. Thankfully, Ana was a master of words.



Crossing her arms over her chest, Ana narrowed her eyes and asked: "Do I even gotta say anything?" Mrs. Wheeler's expression became bashful as she avoided Ana's eye contact, seemingly fixated on a sight somewhere off to her right. Clearly, the direct approach wasn't gonna suffice in this scenario; perhaps a come to Jesus meeting would serve in its stead.

Releasing her rigid posture and intentionally softening her eyes and tone, Ana spoke again. "You know, I always tell my students that their mistakes are their own to make and to suffer the consequences of until they come at the expense of others. Do you know what I mean by that, Mrs. Wheeler?" Ana didn't receive a verbal response to her question, she hadn't honestly expected one, but she now held the older woman's undivided attention. At least, that much was evident by the previously avoiding gaze snapping in her direction at the poignant statement.

Reading this as a sign to continue, Ana blazed on. "It means that an unhampered individual can be reckless and self-indulgent with their decisions because they reflect on themselves and themselves alone. Once you're tied to others, though, impulsiveness must take a back seat to nurture the common good."

Mrs. Wheeler's countenance finally took on a look of guilt, and Ana knew the intended seed was properly planted. Now she need only to watch it grow. Dragging the sunglasses back over her eyes, Ana gave Mrs. Wheeler one last contemplative glance before heading off. "Just some food for thought."



## 39. Chapter 33

Hopper's blazer wasn't parked out front when Ana finally arrived home after what felt like a never-ending workday, and she could only imagine where he'd gone off to at this hour.

The sound of REO Speedwagon's "Can't Fight This Feeling" blared from Eleven's room as Ana walked through the door of the cabin. Usually, Mike and Eleven used the radio to cover up the sound of their makeout sessions, but Ana highly doubted Hopper would leave the two alone in the house unattended.

Silently easing the door open to El's room, Ana found the teenager lying facedown on her bed, head buried in the pillows. The lights were all on, so the girl clearly wasn't sleeping. No, Ana thought as she observed her, this was the position of someone in a sulk.

Before moving to Hawkins, Indiana, Ana had never envisioned herself as a mother. Sure, being a teacher had made her a surrogate parent to countless children, but being responsible for someone's entire upbringing was a different realm altogether. And, before Ana had been given the opportunity to consider the prospect thoroughly, Hopper had put her name on El's birth certificate, thrusting her into the role forevermore.

Ana didn't regret the decision, and she didn't resent Hopper for the choice, but she had to wonder if she was prepared for the responsibility. She'd lived her life independently, and honestly, selfishly, for so long that she wasn't entirely sure she had the capacity for sacrifice anymore.

How long would it be before everyone realized that she wasn't a necessity in their story? Hopper, Eleven, The Wheelers, The Byers and their little party, how long until they noticed that she'd inserted herself into their lives, but didn't entirely belong amongst them? It was thoughts like these that had always driven Ana to stay busy: it was probably the reason she took the job at the pool instead of hanging around the cabin all summer.

For all Ana Thompson's admirable qualities, deep down, she was a



habitually self-deprecating woman, and one with deep-rooted commitment issues to boot. How she'd ended up a part of this small burgeoning family was anyone's guess.

Shaking herself out of these cynical thoughts, Ana approached the teenager and gently sat on the edge of her bed. Eleven made no move to acknowledge the new presence, and it appeared Ana was going to be doing the heavy lifting in at least one more conversation that day.

"Wanna tell me what's ailing you, munchkin?" Ana's question finally stirred Eleven, as the girl sat up with a huff, sitting back against the wall with her arms crossed.

"What's ailing?" El asked with a tinge of annoyance coloring her words. Ana's eyes softened, she often forgot how many things the girl missed out on while trapped in Hawkins National Laboratory.

"It means what's wrong. What's got you all upset?" Ana watched as El fiddled with the hem of her shirt for a few moments, considering the answer. Heart-to-hearts weren't exactly Ana's forte, but she'd wait patiently until the girl was ready to talk.

As the radio behind the two switched over to "Never Surrender" by Corey Hart, Eleven rolled her eyes before switching the device off with her mind. The room was suddenly bathed in silence. "Hopper made Mike leave," El finally responded in a whisper.

Well, that answer wasn't exactly unexpected considering Joyce's warning phone call earlier in the day. Knowing that facts are necessary to formulate a solution, Ana pressed further: "And, what happened before that?"

The notable avoidance of eye contact on the part of El wasn't lost on Ana, so she and Mike weren't entirely innocent in eliciting whatever overreaction came from Hopper. "El," Ana continued to question, "what happened before Hooper made Mike go home?" Another huff escaped the teenager's lips at her persistence. Teenagers always seemed to be huffing at Ana and her completely reasonable questions, she realized.

"He was acting weird, and then he made Mike leave." Real specific,



El, Ana thought while rolling her eyes at the young girl's antics. "He's always weird, you're going to have to be more specific," Ana retorted, trying to insert some humor into their stilted conversation. Her comment had the desired effect and elicited a small smile and chuckle from the girl, which Ana mirrored.

"He tried to *talk* to us," El leaned forward on the bed and confessed as though it were the most absurd prospect imaginable. Nodding her head in understanding, Ana inquired: "And, did you both listen?" The look of guilt that overtook El's features said it all. "I'll take that as a no," Ana stated.

El had returned to fiddling with her shirt hem and avoiding eye contact with Ana. "We might have laughed," the girl mumbled, as though hoping she wouldn't be heard. Great, so Hopper had tried to be level headed with children, not his strong suit by any means, and they'd mocked him openly. Ana knew she would have to find a way to build that fragile psyche back up when he got home.

The silence that followed this confession was tense, to say the least. "I'm sorry," El whispered, breaking the stillness that encased the room. Ana sighed and placed her hands over El's to stop the girl's fidgeting. "I'm not the one you need to say sorry to," Ana asserted gently. El only nodded her head in response.

The sound of a car door slamming outside alerted them to Hopper's return, and El visibly tensed at the potential for another confrontation. Ana squeezed the young girl's hands with her own. "I'll talk to him about it, but you've got to go easy on him too. He loves you, and it's hard for him to watch you grow up so quickly. Think you can help me out a little with that?" Only a deft nod was offered in reply to Ana's question.

Lifting herself off Eleven's bed, Ana began heading out of the room, but stopped short in the doorway. Turning to look over her daughter, the designation still sat strangely in her mind, one last time, Ana called: "You know we both love you, right?" A bashful look crossed Eleven's face before she answered: "I know." The affirmation made Ana's cynical heart swell.

"Good. Then stop making out with your boyfriend so much!" Ana



mockingly shouted before flicking the lights off and closing the girl's door behind her. The sentimental mood was effectively shattered, that much was obvious by the exclamations coming from Eleven, now left behind in the darkened room.

Turning back towards the living room, Ana found it empty. Hopper had made his way home but hadn't made his way inside the house yet, that much was obvious. Crossing their living space and swinging open the front door, Ana found him sitting in the darkness of the porch, only a burning cigarette illuminating his features. Stepping outside herself, Ana joined him in the summer night, a comfortable silence falling between the two.

After stubbing out his finished cigarette, Hopper gestured for her to join him with a quiet: "Come here." Ana quickly obliged him and made herself comfortable sitting on his lap, the two leaning back in the deck chair, listening to the sounds of the night around them.

With Hopper's arms wrapped around her, and her head resting on his shoulder, Ana felt safe. Was this what home was supposed to feel like? Ana had never felt completely comfortable in any place she'd ever resided, for however long that maybe, but right now, she felt contented.

Hopper's nose nuzzled into Ana's hair, and he whispered in her ear: "I feel like I never see you anymore." The statement was punctuated by his arms tightening around her, as though assuring himself that she was indeed there, and not a figment of his imagination.

Turning to press a light kiss to his cheek, Ana agreed with his observation: "I know, it seems I'm always working and never home." His response was immediate: "So, quit. We miss you here."

The request wasn't unreasonable, but Ana's reservations were. If she were always around, everyone would quickly grow tired of her. Her aloof nature would be read as disinterest, and, more importantly, she'd eventually lose her independence to codependence. At least, those were the things Ana allowed herself to believe when the dark recesses of her mind began to close in around her.

Light kisses being peppered along her jaw and neck drew Ana out of



these pessimistic thoughts and back to the present. Tilting her head back further to grant Hopper better access, Ana allowed a moan to escape from behind her lips. A light chuckle followed, and Ana could imagine the smug look on Hopper's face though it was far too dark outside to see it for herself. Drawing back, he questioned: "What goes on in that mind of yours?"

Nothing good, Ana thought but didn't dare utter. "You," she answered breathlessly instead, but before Hopper could revel in the confession, Ana added, "kicking our daughter's boyfriend out."

The audible groan that followed made Ana laugh, which, in turn, earned her a pinch on the side from Hopper. "I don't want to talk about that son of a bitch, Mike," he declared grumpily. Ana was willing to concede, if only for the time being. "Alright, but we'll have to talk about your meddling in the morning."

All further talking ceased as Hopper returned to lavishing the exposed column of Ana's neck with open mouth kisses, but he pulled away once again to her great dissatisfaction. "I want to take you out to dinner. Tomorrow, Enzo's at 7:00 PM," Hopper offered as reason for the halt in his affections.

"Yeah, whatever," Ana responded without really listening. "Now, would you shut up and kiss me already." Hooper didn't have to be told twice.